

Challenges for Principals of secondary schools and colleges in Fiji: Leadership, Integrity and Excellence¹

By

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1. Introduction

The President of Fiji Principals Association, School Principals, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen. I thank you for the invitation to address you on your conference theme on leadership, integrity and excellence. All three are very important attributes for the future of education and the well-being of our nation.

I feel very much honored to have been invited to the Principals conference. As a secondary school student, I had the privilege of studying under three very fine Principals: the late Valekuta Mateni, Mr. Setareki Delana and Mr. Amraiya Naidu. These three individuals showed great dedication, selflessness and passion for the welfare and development of students. They were role models for many of us. The way they led the school had a lasting and significant impact on the lives of many of us students. In fact, my dream when I was in secondary school was not only to become a teacher, but also a principal.

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I did not have the opportunity to become a principal, but today I feel very proud that my brother, Anil Prasad, is a Principal of a secondary school.

The role of School Principals in fostering leadership, integrity and excellence in our school children, and the community at large, is vital. It cannot be underestimated or downplayed. I will expound on this theme later on. But first, let me say a few words about how we have fared since independence in 1970, including its implications for education.

As we all know, Fiji has been caught in a coup cycle since 1987. Economically, we have stagnated in the last 26 years as a result of four coups. This has resulted in an increase in poverty from a low of 7% in the 1970s, to an estimated current high of more than 40%. In other countries like India and China, poverty has generally declined. It shows Fiji is regressing while others, like Singapore and Mauritius for example, are forging ahead. These two latter countries are somewhat comparable to Fiji. At one time, Fiji outranked them in terms of growth indicators. Now Fiji is well behind both of them.

In the last 6 years, Fiji has gone through various challenges characterized by uncertainty and poor economic performance, although since 2011, the economy has shown some sustained improvements. We have reason to be cautiously optimistic. We now have a new Constitution in place. Government has outlined plans for elections before September 30, 2014. While the process of arriving at this Constitution may not have been the best, the fact is that we now have a Constitution which has been implemented. We need to move forward with urgency. We have a lot of catching up to do. We can't afford any more coups. We need to ensure that we provide the leadership that builds on the positive aspects of

the new Constitution. This is where the theme of your conference – leadership, integrity and excellence – could not have been more timely. As I mentioned before, these values not only relevant to your work in schools, but to the nation as a whole.

Earlier this year I talked about the status of teachers at the Fiji Teachers Union conference. I highlighted how teachers can provide leadership to promote democracy in our country. I revisit this crucial theme in my talk today before I talk about leadership.

2. Democracy in the schools and classrooms

None of us as parents would want to send our children to a school where they cannot freely express themselves through debate and discussions. This would be counterproductive to their personal and professional development. I believe that our society dreams of democracy for its children. We want our children to grow up in a free, open, and transparent democratic framework.

This is not the least because creativity and innovation in education is best promoted through democratic teaching and learning. Indeed, it has been established through research over so many years that a creative person must have autonomy. He or she must be connected to the wider society, both locally and internationally, for ideas. He or she must develop a delicate balance between obedience and disobedience.

Therefore, the environment in which our children study can determine whether they become conformists, or creativists. Principals therefore have an important role in creating a school environment and moulding our students to be creative and

equally crucially critically minded. Creativeness, innovativeness and critical thinking are the bedrock of success at the national and international levels. Principals must create the right environment in their schools to release our children's creativity so that they, and their country, can flourish.

By creating such a school environment, we will avoid creating a 'nation of sheep'. As Gandhi once said "Democracy is not a state in which people act like sheep. Under democracy individual liberty of opinion and action is jealously guarded". School Principals and Teachers have an important responsibility in this regard to uphold academic freedom, to articulate different views, engage in free discourse, reason without rancor and debate important issues affecting the country and the world.

So what can Principals do to educate our children in democratic norms? For one, they can instill democratic values by having elections for school prefect. This will help students at an early age to understand the process of elections and of the value of choosing their own leaders. It will also teach accountability and transparency.

3. Status of Principals

Let me now make some remarks on the status of Principals. The School environment is an important democratic space. Principals and teachers therefore play a crucial role in the cultivation of democratic imagination.

In Fiji we can safely say that as a country we have been able to continuously improve our educational objectives, policies, programmes, curricula, text books, and physical infrastructure. However, principals and teachers remain the single

most important factor in determining the quality of teaching. The ability to attract highly motivated, skilled and committed individuals, and retaining them in the profession, is absolutely vital for improving the quality of education in the increasingly challenging global environment.

The retention of principals and teachers is linked to their economic status in that they need to be fairly rewarded for the important work they do. Principals as leaders have a significant responsibility in managing the finances, staff, students and facilities. Additionally, they are required to play an active community role. To attract good leaders, the government ought to review the Principals salaries to bring it to the level of responsibilities that Principals have in schools.

There are only 175 secondary schools in Fiji. If we were to increase the salaries of Principals next year by \$10,000 across the board, we would have raised the starting salary of the lowest level 4C principal's salary to \$38,304 and the starting salary of \$49,529 for the highest level 1D Principal. The highest level Principals salary after a \$10,000 increase would still amount to less than 25% of the salary of the highest paid permanent secretary as of now. The total extra budget that the Ministry would need to raise the Principals' salary by \$10,000 across the board would amount to \$1.75 million. This is a small price to pay for the benefits that will be returned. This is a small, but wise, investment that will bring us good returns. I would urge the government and the Ministry of Education to look seriously into this matter.

Secondly, the social status of Principals is also important. All my three principals in the 1970s and 1980s had very high social status. Back then there was public

recognition and acceptance of Principals as leaders and leading opinion makers in society. They were respected by students and communities alike as promoting moral and ethical standards in society. That status might be less evident today, and it may be because of the erosion of professional pride and professional commitment. It is also due to the deteriorating moral and ethical standards amongst some of our Principals.

The status of Principals and teachers has also been affected negatively in an environment of political instability and uncertainty. This has been the case since 1987, with no end in sight as yet. Many experienced Principals and teachers and school administrators had to leave the service abruptly to migrate as a result of the discrimination they perceived in the civil service. To make matters worse, the Bainimarama government implemented an ill-conceived retirement policy, which effectively shuts out productive and experienced Principals after the age of 55.

I am pleased to say that this policy, which was included in the draft Constitution, has now been removed and it is no longer part of the 2013 Constitution. However, government should immediately change its teacher retirement policy of 55 years to 60. It does not make any economic or educational sense to have a retirement age of only 55 in the civil service and least of all in the teaching profession where experience is vital. It is misguided that reducing the retirement age will help reduce unemployment and provide younger people more opportunities. All it will do is deny us the benefit of quality principals, teachers and administrators.

The public service in Fiji should not be considered as major generator of employment. Employment for young will be generated through better and sustained economic growth led by the private sector. The sooner government does

away with the 55 retirement age policy in the civil service the better. In Papua New Guinea, the Public Service Commission is thinking of increasing the retirement age from 60 to 63.

4. New Leadership in Schools

Let me now turn to leadership, integrity and excellence by highlighting that there is a difference between a leader and a manager. According to management expert, Peter Drucker “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things” My view is that most Principals are good managers but I am not sure if they are also good leaders. Management is about operational issues, managing the day to day affairs but Leadership is about providing and having a vision to lead an organization. As you can see, the distinction is very important.

Once you define and articulate the vision for your schools you will need to build a team to take the organization forward. Leaders would not be able to do this if they have too much pride, greed, anger, hatred and an excess of ego. Good leaders have humility, integrity, self reflexivity and honesty at all times.

Integrity is vital for good leadership. What is integrity and how can we build that in our leadership? Gus Lee & Diane Elliott-Lee, in their book, “*Courage: The Backbone of Leadership*” define integrity as follows and I quote:

“Integrity is acting for what is right. When we do this, we feel whole and uniquely powerful.”

It is always important for Principals to differentiate between the right and wrong. As leaders, if we are not able to do that, than we would be sending a wrong signal

to our students. Equally important is to cultivate not just a moral but an ethical sensibility.

When your colleagues and students; your school management and your community trust and respect you, it is because you as principals possess and embody certain admirable qualities that inspire them. These qualities include humility, understanding, and tolerance of others' points of views rather than being dictatorial and unapproachable in your dealings with students. Any form of dictatorship in school leadership is not going to work in this day and age. Principals should be able to create an environment of collegial debate, allow different view-points amongst students and staff and nurture dissent and respectful disagreement to move towards innovation and excellence.

Some Principals complain about the lack of student, parent and community support. These principals have to question why. They must also look within. Could it be because of the failure of Principals to engage effectively with the parent and community? Principals should find innovative ways of engaging parents. It is not enough to have a parent-teachers meeting once in a year. Parents could be engaged at different levels. Principals could, for example, organise informal talks, discussions, social events and workshops at different form levels with teachers and parents. Parents could be involved in organizing sports events, debates, school bazaars, talents quests, gardening etc. Such collaborations can build and strengthen school-community ties. The community becomes part of the school.

Another dimension that is adding to the increasingly complex role of Principals is the increasing rate of urbanization. The future communities in our country and elsewhere around the world will be urban communities. While urbanization will bring with it new opportunities it will also present special challenges for education or children. With more freedom of choice and exposure externalities such as drug, truancy, crime and urban poverty, Principals will have an even bigger challenge to deal with these issues in schools.

Let me add innovation to your sub-theme of excellence. Innovation and excellence is what is going to define the success of our education system. It is excellence in what we do as a country will determine our place in the world. In this age of globalization we have to be competitive. We can only compete if we promote excellence in our people.

We can no longer rely solely on traditional social institutions such as families, churches and other religious and social institutions to inculcate the virtues of good leadership, ethics and integrity and excellence. In fact many religious organisations and leaders have failed miserably in the past to deal with issues of integrity, ethics and good leadership amongst their members, especially amongst youth. Since 1987, we have seen the ‘immorality of silence’ amongst many of the religious organisations and leaders.

Many of them allowed politicians and public officials to diminish the office they occupied by succumbing to their immoral, unethical leadership roles in our society. Many of these self-serving religious organisations leaders have a lot to explain

when it comes to addressing the social and moral decline in our societies and in our children. Given the failure of many of these religious organisations and their leaders, I am convinced that the only effective social institutions that can promote the virtues of excellence are the schools. It is therefore vital that Principals understand this role and become role models for students. I urge you all to rethink your roles, go beyond the normal bureaucratic ministry of education laid rules in the school to build effective collaborative strategies with parents and the community to serve the students. As principals you can leave lasting legacies for our future generations.

I now turn to another subject in relation to excellence. In many countries excellence is actually measured against global rankings. Benchmarking and measuring against global standards is important for us as a country. The most widely used measure of excellence is based on the OECD introduced Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000. Creating an identity of excellence in our children and in our teachers can take us far. But too often we have concentrated our energy on other forms of identity – ethnic, religious, provincial and regional. What we should focus on is our children’s capacity to excel in positive endeavours and exploit this to the full.

The McKinsey 2007 report on “How the World’s best performing school systems come out on top” identified three issues in relation to high performing schools:

1. The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers;
2. The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction, and;

3. Achieving universally high outcomes is only possible by putting in place mechanisms to ensure that schools deliver high quality instruction to every child

Additionally, in its 2010 report, “How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better” it concluded that a system could become better, no matter what its starting point, given a sustained leadership and a focus on key interventions necessary for systematic improvement. This report highlights the important role of principals, who have to be not only managers, but also leaders.

As you are aware, our economy and our society are constantly influenced by the vagaries of global issues. No longer can countries and societies isolate themselves from international imperatives and needs. We have to therefore produce global citizens. We have to steer our student’s abilities and behaviour in a way that they are not only able to deal with their own cultural and national contexts, but they also develop skills and knowledge that will be applicable beyond their national boundaries.

Let me conclude by saying that in the last 13 years, several reforms have been implemented relating to the curriculum and assessment management of schools. Many of them were perhaps long overdue. It is important to import and adapt new systems that have been tried elsewhere. But we need to be mindful of the context and the readiness of our infrastructure to support changes.

5. Time for another Education Commission in to Fiji’s Education System

The last Education Commission report on Fiji’s education system was done 13 years ago. Another inquiry is long overdue. It is now time for another Education

Commission. The next Education Commission should be based on a detailed analysis of the outputs and outcomes that has been achieved through our education system in the last thirteen years. Fiji's future economic and social progress will depend on the kind of excellence we can bring out from our educational systems. Fiji's national productivity compared to many other similar countries is much lower partly because of lack of excellence in the educational system which has suffered due to coups and political instability.

6. Concluding Comments

In conclusion, let me say that Fiji is again on the cusp of another critical juncture and that is the next general election. It should not matter much who wins the next election. What should and would matter is how those who win lead the country. Leadership based on greed, destructive envy, exclusivity, racial discrimination, lack of moral consciousness and leadership devoid of any ethical sensibility will not serve the country well. What we will need is leadership based on integrity, excellence and inclusiveness. Fiji's misfortune over the last 27 years has been that democracy- whatever its shortcoming- was not allowed to function because of military coups. The democratic deficit is huge and will require leadership, excellence and integrity in all our institutions including our military to reduce that. One hopes that after the General Elections, we would have all learnt our lessons to strive towards sustaining democracy, rule of law through good leadership.

As Principals you are leading children who are mainly aged between 14 and 18. In twenty years' time these children will be between the ages of 34 and 38. They constitute a critical demographic bank as future voters. By then many of you would have retired. Imagine the legacy you can leave behind in terms of leadership

qualities with these students if you do your part. When you look back from your rocking chairs, you will have reason to feel satisfied.

Students respect their principals a lot. Take it from me that they all look upon you as role models. Their expectation of you as a leader is that you will give them lasting influences that would help them develop their skills, knowledge, and cultivate attributes such as integrity, leadership and excellence. Their parents put great faith in you. They expect you to have the welfare of their boys and girls in your hearts. Do not let students, parents, and this country down.

I thank you all and I do hope that in the next two days you will have some serious discussions about your roles and we can improve the opportunities for good leadership not only in schools but build a foundation for excellence and integrity in leadership at the national level. I thank once again for the invitation and it is my pleasure to declare your conference open.