

Character Development for a Better Nation: The Spiritual Dimension of Schooling¹

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I would like to begin by thanking the organisers of this lecture/seminar for honouring me with this invitation to speak to you today. I am also honoured to be presenting amongst nationally renowned persons such as former parliamentarian and academic Dr Ganeshwar Chand, Mr Darlyl Tarte of the Media Council and the Honourable senator, Mr Dixon Seeto.

Introduction

The issue of making moral and ethical decisions is significant in these new times of rapid social, cultural, political, economic and technological change. Students will need to be guided into making sound moral and ethical choices in everything they do, whether in or outside the classroom. While the family as the basic social unit of society, and the church, can play a significant role in this area, their impact is neutralised by the changing dynamics brought about by urbanisation, globalisation, changing economic structures including high levels of poverty and the like. It is therefore imperative that schools also take the lead in ‘teaching’ and ‘practising’ sound moral values. The building of character through moral education should be strongly emphasised in school organisation and curriculum so that upright, law-abiding citizens are produced who can live lives of moral significance.

I would like to declare my standpoint at the outset to reduce misunderstandings that could occur due to misrepresentation of what I may say. In defining myself, I am first and foremost a Christian, who loves the Lord God Jehovah and my Lord and saviour Jesus Christ with my whole heart, mind, soul and might and for whom the Bible is my blueprint for living. I am indigenous Fijian second, and the third defining element of my composite identity includes everything else, including female, educator, professional worker, mother, community member and citizen of Fiji. How I see and think about the world is shaped and influenced by these three defining features of my personal, cultural and spiritual identity.

It is from this standpoint that I have chosen to speak on the topic ‘Character Development for a Better Nation: the Spiritual Dimension of Schooling’. It is my belief that irrespective of race, ethnicity, cultural group, religious affiliation, class or gender, a country or nation is only as good as the quality of citizens that it has. If Fiji has many people with good character – beginning with our political leaders (e.g. cabinet ministers, parliamentarians, local organisational heads), our cultural leaders (e.g. chiefs, heads of villages), our religious leaders (e.g. church elders) and social leaders (e.g. parents) and this permeates all the way through those that are led – the people - then it follows that we would have better families and homes, better workplaces, a better society and a better nation. We must be good adult role models if we are to raise children who fear God, who honour those in authority – including the government, their teachers and their parents, children who respect other people and their property, and children who value community and relationships.

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It will become obvious that my focus is specifically on schools managed by government (most are predominantly Fijian), church groups or indigenous Fijian communities. Since Fijians are predominantly Christians, I am advocating that Christian values and Biblical principles be the foundational cornerstones of these schools. In fact, I would like to suggest that Fijian education has not significantly improved over the last 50 years because we have lost sight of one important factor in Fijian schools – that of consciously bringing God into the school system. Many Fijian schools have operated in almost total isolation from the reality and truth of God. It is therefore critical for schools to take a more proactive role in the spiritual development of the child instead of the tokenism approach currently undertaken. As Proverbs 22: 5 emphasizes, train up a child in the way he should go so that even when he is old, he will not depart from it. Or as my Senior Pastor, Pastor Josua Mateiwai said in church on Sunday (Bible Study, 16 July 2006), everything begins with our thoughts – which translates into action – which translates into habits which determine the character of the person which in turn determines the destiny of that child. If we train them to develop good habits which will translate into good character, then we can be assured that we will develop a new breed of children who will become the leaders of the future – morally sound individuals with the conscience and character to make a significant difference to the very fabric of this beloved nation we call Fiji.

In Fiji, where there is a sizeable non-Christian population, and where non-Christian organisations have set up schools, I must make the point that their freedom to practise their religion or culture is never in question. I admire Muslim, Hindu and other religious organisations in Fiji where their schools are solidly built on their religious and cultural values, beliefs and protocol, which are respected by people of other religions who choose to attend these schools. This is the very principle and model that I draw on in my suggestion that predominantly Fijian schools be solidly founded on Christian values and Biblical principles.

Moral education – the development of character

Reading the newspapers and watching television to get local and world news or even for entertainment can be very hazardous to the moral development of our young people. In fact, it can be downright dangerous. I say this with total conviction, particularly examining some samples from the local media. For instance, sexual immorality is rife such as sex crimes against children and women, including rape, incest and pornography. There are also regular reports of other crimes against humanity such as bank and home robberies - often inflicted with much violence - corruption, murder, substance abuse, and drunken driving leading to road deaths. The list goes on.

Any child or adolescent reading or watching the local news is likely to draw the conclusion that living in Fiji may be dangerous. Indeed, the family, which is supposed to be the primary haven for children and the building block of society, is attacking and turning on itself. The increase in the number of street children, old people in institutional homes, divorces and incest cases provide examples of this breakdown in the family. The increasing crime rate, high poverty levels and significantly high unemployment are indications that not all is well in the social and spiritual health of the people of this nation.

I am therefore concerned that moral education – educating the heart, soul and spirit of individuals – oftentimes a neglected area in schooling and home socialisation should be given higher priority by those in key leadership positions such as the Ministry of Education, principals of schools and teachers, government and parents. Moral education – whose morals, what morals and the ‘how’ issue (implementation at school) - in fact, has exercised the minds of policy

makers and decision makers all over the world for centuries. While the same may be said for Fiji, I feel that not enough attention has been devoted to this important element in formal schooling. I would like to suggest that the Ministry of Reconciliation & Unity, the Ministry of Education and other relevant bodies such as the Ministry of Women and Culture, and Ministry of Health strategise and collaborate more effectively as state entities and with other key stakeholders to see how moral education can be better defined, developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated.

I hope that some suggestions I make in this paper might be useful in this reconceptualisation of the spiritual dimension of schooling, particularly as they apply to predominantly indigenous Fijian schools whose students and teachers are predominantly Christian. I would like to emphasise that developing good citizens necessitates an examination of what schools (both secular and managed by religious organisations) are doing about the moral development of our children. I am implicitly implying that the development of good character (the good citizen) and national identity are intricately interlinked. In fact I am advocating the ‘development of the spirit at a more fundamental level’ (O’Sullivan, 1999) in formal schooling. For as Jesus said in Mathew 33: 6, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you” – ‘all these things’ here referring to food on the table, clothes to wear, shelter over our heads, other material provisions, blessings, success, prosperity and everything good, including peace, unity and reconciliation.

There are already some Christian schools which are grounded firmly in Biblical principles and values. I would like to suggest that in rethinking schooling in Fiji, the secular and spiritual ought to meet in the schools. Western countries, like the United States for instance, have pushed God right out of schools and are attempting to push Him right out of public spaces. It is my contention that we in Fiji are in a special position to make sure this does not happen in our country. I am, in fact, arguing that the spiritual development of indigenous Fijians, to be founded solidly on Christian values and Biblical principles, must be brought to the local and national consciousness.

Many people will argue that the spiritual development of the individual should be left to the churches or to religious organisations. I would like to stress that the development of character should be an essential component of schooling. It is too important an element to be left to chance. Since students spend the bulk of their waking hours in pursuit of a formal education, then schools are a key site for enhancing the spiritual development of the person.

Schools have been under a lot of pressure to perform. They are expected to produce an educated workforce by providing the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes, produce a literate and numerate society, and provide well-rounded and law-abiding citizens able to take their ‘rightful’ place in society. Additionally, schools may be perceived as a ‘baby-sitting’ agency where parents are too busy getting on with the business of making ends meet. Principals and teachers may understandably baulk at the additional responsibility of moulding the character of children, a role usually perceived to be best left to the family and the church.

The challenges we are facing today is that of a nation held under siege by problems which have at its root people who have somehow lost their way, either by design or by the circumstances they find themselves in. The fact that they did not have the moral integrity to do the right thing is the root cause for the increasing crime rate, increasing moral decay and immorality, and social problems that we are facing today in Fiji, indeed around the world.

Schools and the government of the day need to take a more proactive role in deliberately including character development or moral education in the formal schooling process. Each Fijian school should therefore examine what Christian values underpin their schools and how they can be more genuinely committed to ensuring that these moral values permeate the way the whole school is organised, taught and managed. This should translate into a genuine commitment on the part of school heads and teachers to ensure that the moral development of all students is emphasised in Fijian schools.

As a first step, a comprehensive survey of primary and secondary school curricula and organisation should be conducted to assess the gaps in the development of sound moral character in our young people. I believe that every school head should consciously and deliberately reflect on their own relationship with God as well as to consider putting in place measures to ensure that the character development of students is not underplayed or ignored.

Christian values in Fijian schools

How do we bring the ideas on an inclusive spiritual pedagogy espoused in this paper into reality? How do they translate into practice in our schools? Here are some suggestions for consideration:

- (i) Bring God into the school and make Him central in Christian schools and in those where the majority of the population is predominantly indigenous and Christian. I envisage schools beginning each day with prayer, praise and worship either in individual classes or collectively as a school, where staff and students consciously commit each day to the Lord and the whole school compound resounding in beautiful singing, praising and exalting the true living God. This could take from 5 to 30 minutes at the most. The singing of the National Anthem could be included in this programme.
- (ii) Revise and redevelop the current Religious Education curriculum with the help of church organisations, the Fiji Christian Teachers Fellowship and the community. Christian values of honouring God, people and justice (Waugh, 2005), love, forgiveness, concern for others, compassion, living together in peace and harmony, patience, a disciplined life, goodness, kindness, service, others before self, for example, can be covered through Bible study and practice. If schools choose, the concepts of God's divinity, God's word, sin, righteousness, truth, faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit, servanthood and discipleship can be systematically covered. It follows that those teachers teaching this subject must be carefully chosen. They themselves must be people who are morally upright with a deep love for God. They must be God-fearing and godly people.
- (iii) Alternatively, the teaching of these Christian values and principles could be interwoven into all subjects in a fully integrated way. This will need fully committed Principals and teachers to make this work.
- (iv) Teachers themselves need to be exemplars and role models in these areas. Their own behaviour, attitudes and relationships ought to reflect Christian principles and values.
- (v) Teaching methods ought to reflect Christian values, for example, 'smart' children can be encouraged to help the weaker ones in class in a spirit of cooperation and helping each other. Team work rather than individualism should be nurtured in the school.
- (vi) Schools ought to be encouraged to reach out to the community around them with Christian acts of love, kindness, compassion and serving others such as helping clean up the neighbourhood, visiting sick classmates, visiting orphanages and old people's homes, to name some activities.

- (vii) Teachers can help students to redesign the classrooms so that spiritual items of significance can be brought into the classroom. For example, a cross may be placed at the front (like in church), a Bible could be placed in a prominent place for students wanting to read it during their free time, students' favourite scriptures could be artistically decorated and placed on walls.
- (viii) School administrators have significant responsibilities to ensure that the organisation of the institution, and all relationships within, are reflective of good Christian practices. Christian values such as love, respect, hospitality, cooperation, relationships and community should underpin the entire organisation.
- (ix) Teacher training institutions need to rethink their structures, processes, curricula, pedagogies and organisational culture to bring about the expected transformation at the level of the learner. They need to rethink how to include the spiritual dimension of schooling in everything they do, and not just in the preparation of their student teachers. Teacher educators themselves need to be good role models for trainee teachers.
- (x) The spiritual and the secular ought to be integrated more effectively. For example, where practicable, Fijian boarding schools could have a church minister on the staff to take moral education. In villages, church elders can be brought into the school to take devotions. This, if done properly, can lead to enhanced school-community partnerships and relationships.

These are suggestions only and are not meant to be prescriptive. However, one thing is clear. Moral education or the character development of our children is everyone's responsibility, and not just solely the responsibility of principals and teachers in schools.

Conclusions

If families and churches also did their part in making God the key focus of life, then I have no doubt that we will see a significant change in local and national life. Lives will be changed and the positive consequences of this change on the social, economic and political fabric of society will be far reaching. In fact, all the institutions must work together to build morally sound individuals – the family, church and schools in particular must take the lead in this. Every institution in this nation – Cabinet Ministers, Parliamentarians, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Reconciliation and other ministries, principals, teacher unions, the churches and other religious organisations and all other important stakeholders – must revisit the school system to assess how best we can ensure that the spiritual development of our children – education of the heart, soul and spirit - is given equal status as that of the education of the mind and hands.

It is when we consciously and deliberately bring God into the schools that we can expect positive changes to society. With God the key focus in children's lives, we can be assured that we will develop future citizens of good character – god-fearing, godly people who will make a difference in Fiji, people with moral integrity who will stand up for right over wrong, who will be worthy law-abiding citizens, who will walk with God as Noah and other great men and women of God did, who will love all people irrespective of race, religion, gender or class, with mutual respect as a cornerstone of their lived lives.

However, a first condition for this to happen is for parents and adults to turn back to God as highlighted in 2nd Chronicles 7:14: “And if My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from

heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land”. The whole nation must return to God, there must be a fervent search for God by individuals. For to develop quality education in the land, to ensure that children become good citizens of this nation, we need to start with the adults – the leaders in every social, economic, political and religious institution must reassess their own relationship with the Lord. Parents, church leaders, politicians, cabinet ministers, teachers – all people in all walks of life must turn back to God. Only then can we have true reconciliation, healing, unity, peace, success, prosperity, abundance and provision. Fiji will indeed be a blessed nation.

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