

Re-capping ‘On Education & Respect’

Story & photos by Dawn Fraser Kawahara



The first article I wrote on the subject of schools visited on travels (“An Echo of Rodney Dangerfield”, HSTA-R “Chatter”, Jan. 2008) posed the following questions:

“How to bring back the hunger, the excitement of learning . . .? How to go back to the time when receiving an education was a burning desire, not a yoke placed about your neck for twelve years plus servitude in a designer school with decent classrooms and supplies—all provided free?”

I thought a great deal about those questions during the interim time, and about the thoughts I’d also suggested as possible partial solutions. I also thought a great deal about what I had seen and experienced at the Imayam School.

“Maybe, I think, all should not be provided free. Perhaps some books should have to be purchased by those whose parents work, or even by work done by the kids, in kind or otherwise. This might offset some of the laziness and lethargy I’ve observed in American kids, born with the proverbial silver spoon in their mouths, by comparison. If they were to join with their parents and grandparents in working extra to fund equipment and supplies in their schools, and maybe trees and plants (digging holes and planting same), they might not so readily deface walls and set fires—they might value and take pride in their school buildings, lavatories, and grounds.

“Such is the case at the Imayam School near Tuticorin, in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India. My husband and I, and all those traveling with us, were moved deeply by these children and their joy and appetite for learning during our visit with the Ka`Imi Na Au`ao o Hawai`i Cultural Institute group last January.”

‘Something behind the scenes was at work’

In these months since writing that first article for this publication, I read the amazing book *Three Cups of Tea*, telling of one man’s mission to provide education to children

in Afghanistan, and I also heard the latest news from the Imayam School in South India. It seemed that by opening up to the exploration of ideas dealing with students, schools and education, something behind the scenes was at work, bringing me facts and more ideas focused on the subject.

In reading *Three Cups of Tea* (a wonderful read/true-life adventure story) I realized that Greg Mortenson’s focused passion as outlined in the book supplanted hatred that



Creating the day's pattern:

An Imayam schoolgirl works on her intricate kolam design—a practical and cultural art form of S. India—drizzling rice flour skillfully through her fingers on the ground.

might be sown into Afghani children (and their parents) and, instead, gave them individualized and indirect contact with a “beautiful” American and his co-workers, plus education that helps free the mind and reject hate doctrines.

I heard all good things about the students at the Imayam School, too, from their liaison/best supporter on Kaua’i, Vi Ganesan Herbert. Their principals who established and run the school were intent on keeping their promise that if students excelled, they would finish out the 12th standard (grade level). In the face of not yet having a twelfth grade classroom built, nor a teacher hired for it, and no extra scholarship money, one of this pair gave up her health insurance to free funds to place her students in other schools this past year. This took much time in meeting and interviewing, showing final scores on the standard school tests to prove the students were worthy for the “other” schools, and getting them enrolled so they could finish the upper level learning and receive their certificates. *Bravo!*

I can’t help having a great deal of respect for this kind of dedication.

To get back to the subject of respect, or why the lack of it today in our schools, my husband, retired science teacher Delano “Dee” Kawahara, had also posed this question: “Do kids have to be starving to starve for education?” We both hope not.

So, again the question: How to bring back the hunger, the excitement of learning such as we found in these “poor” schools? How to return to the base truth that education is a means to a better life, if not a way to pull yourself out of a cycle of poverty and labor approaching slavery—sometimes even life cut short—in other countries.

Painting on Ground:

An intricate kolam flower blooms on the bare, school playground earth—here today, and another design will bloom tomorrow.



Students who work to give & engender respect

The children at the Imayam School near Tuticorin, in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India, would be considered of such low caste and most probably would become throwaways if it were not for their school. Instead, their education and sustenance is being provided through the efforts of two persevering and godly women—Saraswathi and Ponrathi—who have left long careers in school administration and teaching to sink all their retirement funds and family inheritances into establishing and

“Every activity seemed infused with the love flowing down from their principals.”

running this school, rescuing and providing for the children. Their students haven’t enough bus fare to attend regular schools; without the Imayam School’s outreach they would sink to the lowest imaginable economic status. Without a doubt, if they survived, they would follow the same route as their poverty-stricken parents we visited in a village cluster of makeshift huts and attendant squalor.

The boys and girls who attend Imayam school come to a simple building with classrooms slowly being added, one by one as money and donations allow for completion. At daybreak,

they walk several miles from their dirt-poor villages—often barefoot, without benefit of even the cheapest rubber slippers. They are much smaller in stature than our children because of their early lack of proper food and nutrition, however, this doesn’t appear to slow them down in the learning areas.

We witnessed their passionate involvement with learning, both in the classroom and on the packed earth playground. We attended their Science Fair, staged well with the simplest of supplies; their traditional dance program; their morning exercises; their specialized art displays. Every activity seemed infused with the love flowing down from their principals. We walked their fruit tree and vegetable garden, seeing the result of their labors wresting food from previous thorn-and-stubble fields. We bowed our heads as they chanted the lunch meal blessing, then gratefully held out their

plates for a simple, hot, vegetarian meal—maybe the only one they would receive that day.

We received their heartfelt greeting and respect, and thanks for school supplies, rubber slippers and lunch meals our group wished to donate. We talked to them in English, shared postcard views of our home island, taught and demonstrated hula, and laughed with them as we stumbled over their Tamil language cues. We supervised a day of cross-cultural learning, and always these children were ready and present, each one of them.

‘Ad Altiora’ – To the Highest

After several days’ visits we were loathe to leave behind our young friends, their caring staff of young teachers, and their duo of principals. We had glimpsed the dream of a better life flickering in those many sets of dark eyes, the thrust toward freedom that education and training in special skills may bring to free those children’s spirits from the wheel of poverty and shortened life spans, slow starvation, ill health and misery. We knew their teachers and principals were offering them the promise of the chance to work and make their lives better.



Captured attention:

Students and a teacher of the Imayam School cluster about the writer, intent on seeing postcard scenes of Kaua’i. Many of them have never had the opportunity of seeing the sea, even though they live but 20 miles from the Bay of Bengal.



Smiling eyes:

Orphanage kids in Trichy show their enjoyment of Ka ‘Imi’s hula dancing. Without benevolent help and a chance to be educated, many of India’s children would become throwaways.

This, too, was the case in the simple country school we visited in the high mountains outside of Cuzco, Peru, some years ago. And we are thinking it will be the same in the farm village school we are slated to visit outside Antigua, Guatemala, during our upcoming annual exploration overseas.

“...are still pondering—and agonizing over—this question...”

How is it, we ask ourselves again, that in our land of ‘milk and honey’ such well-provided, abundant gifts within our own educational system are devalued and denigrated by our own youngsters and young adults? Surely our youth don’t have to suffer actual hunger or deprivation to become hungry for learning. My husband, retired teacher Delano “Dee” Kawahara, and I are still pondering—and agonizing over—this question and, I hope, incorrect correlation.

I am still trying, in my own small sphere, to find ways to contribute at least part of an answer. And in my mind’s eye I am seeing again the motto woven into the hat band of my big sister’s Australian school uniform—*Ad Altiora*. Latin, as it was explained to me, for “To the Highest”. The idea of “reach,” as in reaching for the highest in whatever goal a person sets for her or his self in behavior and representation, my teacher mother explained, did not need to be stated: it was built in, or fully understood.

Editor’s Note: The writer, author of *Jackals’ Wedding, A Memoir* and *Behold Kaua’i*, received the good news that her original article for HSTA-R “Chatter”, expanded to include some of this final material, recently won second prize in the prestigious 2008 Biennial Lorin Tarr Gill Writing Competition sponsored by the National League of Pen Women—Honolulu Chapter.

Lunch meal at Imayam School:

Served following handscrubbing and a prayer chant of thanks, this vegetarian meal of rice and vegetables eaten S. Indian style with the fingers may be the only meal students get in a day, besides a cup of milk. The girls’ group is nearby. Some days the kids line up eagerly for a “treat” of a raw carrot doled to each. Meats, ice cream and candies are unknown delicacies to them.

