OVERCOMING CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

As told by Sione Ika

This case explores a Pacific Islander's life in the United States. His experiences as a college student and as a high school teacher afford insights into cultural assimilation. Part A recounts Sione's college experiences and his first few years of teaching in a rural village in the western part of the U.S. Sione also describes an experience he had when he was a high school band teacher with a Native American student. In Part B, Sione discusses why Pacific Islanders can have a difficult time adjusting to American culture, especially school culture. He also describes what he has done as a teacher and as a member of his community to help students from minority cultures succeed in school.

Part A

Eighteen years ago I left the Pacific Islands to come to the U.S. to attend a university because there was no college in my homeland. I came with the idea that to gain an education is a great thing. Anybody with a degree from a university, especially an American university, was expected to come back and do just about anything. In fact, I was not thinking of going back particularly to teach. I was thinking of going back to help my village in any way I could.

At the university I spread myself a little too thin. Part of my problem was that I was interested in a lot of things and--to be most useful back home--I thought that I should know a little bit about everything. So I did not have a focus. I majored in political science and minored in English, and because I was not particularly strong in math, I took a lot of math classes. My last two terms I took music classes. I knew that when I went back to my village they'd expect me to know everything. They'd have me teach the choir and the band, as well as English, math, and science. You see, I would be the only person with a degree in the village.

I finally graduated, but I did not feel ready to go back. I did not feel confident. I decided to go to graduate school and was accepted into a master's program in political science. I also took band, basically because I love football. I couldn't afford the tickets, so this was a way to see the games for free. After I took my first graduate political science class, I knew that I was in the wrong field. So I changed my degree to music. I studied music for about four years and certified to teach it. Somehow I felt natural in that field, especially when I was conducting.

At the university I was different in a lot of ways from the other students. When I started the master's program I was still learning English and I had three kids and a wife. Also, the cultural thing was still very difficult for me, even though I did not see it at that time. I think some of the things I did back then were probably not acceptable in the dominant culture. I look back now and think, "Oh I did that, oh my gosh." If someone did such things in front of me now I would be offended. I remember thinking, "if only I knew what should be the right thing to do." I did such things out of ignorance. I did not know. Maybe people were offended, but they tried
not to show it. They tolerated me somehow. I remember many professors who reached out and really helped me.

After graduation I was ready to go back to my village. But there was a monopoly back there--they will pick and choose the people they want and they tell you when you get there what you should teach. I asked them for more specifics about what I would do in the high school that I was going to teach in, but they only said, "Oh, just come on back." I did not like this situation. Then, a couple of my university professors helped me locate a job here. Even though they knew I was not at the top of the class, they had a lot of confidence in me. That was something that really touched me. When they knew I couldn't speak the language--I still can't, I'm still working on it--and they knew that I was struggling because I had to switch majors and had a family, at the end of the year they told me they would recommend me for a job. In fact, it was just one phone call to a principal who had an opening, and I had a job.

I taught band from eighth grade through twelfth grade in a high school in Hillsdale, a rural village a few hours away from the city. I stayed there for three years, and then I saw on TV the gang problems among Pacific Islanders in the city. There were no Pacific Islanders in Hillsdale, so I decided to move to the city. I wanted to help my people out and I had over extended myself as a teacher. In Hillsdale I said yes to everything. I said yes to every parade, even in the winter. I said yes to every football and basketball game, even when it meant seven hours of traveling after school on week nights. Sometimes we would not get home until 2:00 in the morning and school started at 7:30.

It was only during my last year in Hillsdale, when I did the summer band, that they asked me what I wanted for teaching in the summer. I was too shy to ask for anything. I said, "You just give me whatever you want." They gave me more than anything I would have ever expected: it was beyond my imagination. Only later I found out that other teachers who did the same thing were getting three or four times as much money as I was. I never asked for anything extra because in my culture you just said yes, even if you didn't get paid for it. If I'd known this culture better, I would have asked to be paid and probably would have gotten it. In my culture I am taught to be thankful for whatever I get, which is okay. It has helped me, but yet I look back now and say, "Well, I could have had this or that if only I had asked."

In my culture you are taught to be very humble. Where I come from a King is in charge, and whatever he says is always right, and the nobles are always right, and the church leaders are always right. We were born to be commoners and always say yes to the nobles. As children we are taught to always obey. Other adults, besides our parents, could discipline us. A good example of this happened when I was young. A bus would drive by everyday and I'd cross the street very close to the bus. One day the bus driver stopped the bus and got out, found a stick and whipped me three times. My mother stepped out and said, "thank you" to him. I still remember that. Even now I'll never cross too close to a bus. The whole idea behind what happened is that the community works together. The Pacific Islander kids here in the States are having trouble, I think, because all of a sudden they have so much freedom to do what they want compared to what they were used to. Here in the States I still struggle a lot if I disagree with
something. Because of my upbringing it will take a lot of courage for me to complain about something.

Anyway, when I moved to the city, there was a job opening up in ESL in a high school. For the last five years I've been teaching ESL and social studies, and last year I had a music class. Sometimes I have four or five different cultures and languages all in the same ESL class. I can't speak their languages either, and I am learning English just like they are.

Although it was a long time ago, I still think back to my three years in Hillsdale. There's one student I will never forget. He was the only Native American in the band. I still feel guilty about him. He was the best in the band the year before I taught it, and he knew it. I could see the happiness on his face when the year began. He loved the fact that he was number one. He didn't say anything, but on the first day of school he grabbed his horn and he sat where the number one person would be sitting. I would never have done that. Even if I was number one, I would wait.

In my experience in band you try to compete. I thought that's the only way to get kids to go home and practice. In school back in my village it was all cooperation. But when you step into school here, it's competition from the very first day. When I took band in college, they challenged me and I took number one. The band teacher was so impressed with me and I felt so good. I've never felt so good ever in band.

Well, in Hillsdale, I had all the students take a test. He was the best, so he stayed in the number one seat. Then, after a month, I said, "Okay, let's have a challenge. You challenge number one and if you do better then you'll move up and number one will move down." Then I tried to have the rest of the group beat him, and one of them did. So the Native American student moved down to the number two seat. I can still see his face. I realized that he didn't like that. I thought, "He's not happy so he'll go home and practice." But with each challenge he went down some more in the seating. He didn't show that he was upset about it, but you could tell that he was not happy. He would start coming late, and his interest in band in general just kind of dwindled. After a couple of weeks he quit the band. I saw him later, but I didn't know what to say. I felt really bad and then I kind of thought, "Well, I blew it, so just be quiet and don't do it again." If I knew then how he felt about competition--knowing then what I know now--I would have done things very differently. He would have been a very valuable member of the band. But I didn't know and I wasn't sensitive enough to find out, and I didn't have the training in multicultural education to help me.

I was devastated when he dropped out. I could see myself in him. We were the only minorities in the band, he and I, and I lost him. I still blame myself for that. Later he moved to another school in the next village, so I never saw him again. I don't know where he went, or whether that made a difference in his life. He was very smart. I think he'll survive.
Part B

When I moved to the city, the first thing I did was take a multicultural class—the first one offered in the district. I've learned a whole lot since then. Now everything I do is to help the minority kids and their families to at least know what is expected of them in the U. S. This is, I think, my biggest challenge. I'm also a licensed realtor because I've heard of many Pacific Islanders who lost their homes all of a sudden. The bank had been writing to them reminding them of their obligations, but they did not always understand the language, or the ramifications of bills because where we come from there are no bills. I think my house in the village was the only one that had electricity and therefore bills—but that was only the last year I was there. Here there are all these new things going on, and, I think that's why a lot of the minorities are struggling. A lot of their homes are lost because they don't know beforehand about things like bills. So even when I teach I try to give some information to the students to take to their parents. I didn't lose a home, but it's hard to see your people get smacked in the face before they learn.

In the schools here most of the teaching advocates individualism. The teachers discourage group work. I suspect that that is why some Pacific Islanders join gangs. They want to form groups because they think they are becoming part of a trusting community. This is a big part of our culture. We were taught early on to rely on each other. The American concept of standing on your own is totally different. In my culture one would find people willing to accept any offer of help from anyone. It would be very tacky to refuse an offer. Such a person would be considered too proud.

As a teacher I have learned that it is important to accept new students the way they are, especially when it comes to language. It is from their first language that students learn a second language. Sometimes in this culture students go to a classroom and the message they get on the first day is, "change to English which is better." Some students are confused when teachers send messages that English is the best language and at the same time tell the class, "We have a person from another culture in our class so now we'll learn about that culture." I would suggest that teachers use volunteers to authenticate the child's first language. Students will feel better about school instead of feeling inferior because they grew up in a "wrong" culture.

When ESL students are encouraged by the school system to change their language in order to survive, the relationship can deteriorate between the parents and the child. The children start taking charge. They are the ones communicating at the grocery store and with the dentist, doctor, and others because their parents cannot. When the parents lose control of their children at home there are more problems at school. Teachers must let the children know that even though they speak English, there is still a place for their native language in their home and that their native language is valued.

What I've learned is that if I speak a little bit of somebody's language, they'll feel more accepted. That's one of the things I've tried to do now as a teacher. I've tried to incorporate some of the different languages into the curriculum to help students learn the lesson I am teaching. My students are very responsive to me that way. Part of the reason why I felt bad
when I was going to school is that my language was never accepted: "It is too bad you have a
different language. Now learn a better language."

But it still hurts to think back to the Native American student in Hillsdale. My university
professors did it different with me from what I did with him. Those professors reached out, and
I think that made a difference in where I am now. I didn't reach out to him. It is a good
reminder to me.