**Chapter 4　School Wars**

We somehow managed to get through the waves of the Lehman shock.

Fortunately, April 15th, 2010, Reserve Bank of Fiji (equivalent to the Bank of Japan) announced the devaluation of the Fiji dollar by 20%. This greatly helped our business get back on our feet. All of Fiji's expenses became 20% discounted. The Lehman Shock wasn't all that bad.

Yet I was still not in ease. Half a year after the Lehman Shock came the Greek Shock and the Cypress Shock.

So, I decided to analyze the shortcomings of our business model. The fundamental problems that we faced in the last six months were not only the fact that number of new applicants drastically reduced due to the downfall of economy but students who already applied started cancelling.

The streak of hope was that students already in Fiji were enjoying their time from the bottom of their hearts, regardless of the economic recession. For them it was irrelevant whether the world was suffering from any recession or not. They had quit their jobs to come here in the first place.

It soon became obvious how I needed to change my business model. We needed our students to stay abroad longer. If the period of studying abroad becomes longer, we would be able to continue business for the time being with the students already in Fiji even if the society undergoes an economic upheaval. If all the students left after three months from the upheaval, we would soon go out of business.

　So, the principle challenge was how can we make our students stay longer?

The main market was students studying abroad for three to six months. It was unrealistic to lengthen it to over a year, let alone lengthen it two or three years.

So, what should I do?

To which I recalled the words of a student I had heard three years ago.

This girl had come to study in Fiji as part of a seminar class at Hokuriku Junior College. It was a short three-week course. The girls fully enjoyed their stay in Fiji and returned to Japan.

Coincidentally, I was on the same flight back to Japan with these girls. With their seminar teacher at the lounge of Nadi International Airport, I had the opportunity to hear about their impressions on their study at Fiji. The plane we were supposed to ride back to Japan was abruptly cancelled and the alternative flight was to transfer at Sydney, Australia.

We were dropped off at Sydney, with nothing in plan but to wait for the next flight to Tokyo. I negotiated with the airline and had a tourist visa issued for our group of Hokuriku Junior College students, the teacher, and myself so that we could kill our free time in Sydney. We were also offered free shuttle service The Rocks (near Sydney's Opera House).

We had almost ten hours of free time. I took the girls around the Opera House and even got a chance to stop by at the Sydney Aquarium which was nearby.

One of the girls casually mumbled to me,

"I am actually a year older than everyone else. I was held back in high school because my atopic dermatitis broke out horribly and I couldn't attend school for a year."

I glanced at her arms and neck, and realized her skin looked a bit flaky as she mentioned.

"Perhaps if I lived in Fiji where the environment was clean, I could've attended school."

I wasn't that focused on this conversation, just casually listening. It didn't particularly strike me with an innovative inspiration. It took more than three years for that moment to take shape as an idea.

I can lengthen the students' period of studying abroad by starting a high school!!　And if I could sell how attractive Fiji is as a learning environment, Japanese high school students are sure to come!

I consolidated my ideas and briefed about it at the board meeting. The meeting was held with the so-called board of directors, but there wasn't a single board member that wasn't sympathetic to me. All those who confronted me in the past had already left.

So, I said to the board of directors,

"Some schools help elevate a student's potential of getting into a university from Waseda University (one of Japan's prestigious private universities) to the University of Tokyo (Japan's most advanced university). Some schools help an illiterate child how to read and write."

I continued, "But to make it possible to provide children, whose circumstance does not allow them to be educated, with the opportunity to learn! How high of a significance is that?"

All the newly appointed directors were those who thought like me. So, the new board of directors unanimously approved my idea.

All that was left was to actually make the school. Although I have established vocational schools (language schools) before, I did not have any experience in starting a new high school. There were difficult obstacles, but I managed to obtain agreement from the town mayor of Waya Lailai Island of the Yasawa Islands to establish a new high school because there weren't any at Yasawa Islands. He offered us land on the southernmost island of Yasawa Islands, the Kuata Island, to build the high school.

Kuata was a small uninhabited island with a perimeter of five kilometers. It is said to be the location where the protagonist acted by Tom Hanks in the movie "Castaway" landed.

There truly is nothing at the island.

I drew a design plan for constructing a wooden schoolhouse (partially made with concrete) by myself. I sent two university students who were my fan and wanted to help build the school with two of my employees as responsible persons to this uninhabited island. One of the students who came to help me joined a plant development company called JGC Corporation after graduation and is currently oil in Kuwait.

Now that I think about it, sending them off to that environment was close to complete negligence.

But first, I needed to secure water!

They went to Kuata with a diesel generator, shovels, pickets, professional tools for well-digging, pots to cook rice, a frying pan to make side dishes, rice, oil, salt, ..., and a spear to catch fish which would be their main source of food.

This may sound like a joke--- these men kept digging wells for a couple of weeks while living in a hut that they built with tree branches and coconut leaves. No matter how much they dug, well water was not found. Hence, we moved the location to Waya Lailai Island where there used to be a village.

Yet, we still had no water. I instructed them to dig under the big mango tree, the only tree standing in the island. The all-mighty internet told me that water veins ran under big trees.

　Yet, we were STILL not able to find water.

　The plan went down the drain in three months. (excuse me for the pun)

If this was an ordinary person, he/she will non-reluctantly accept the results. BUT Hiroshi Taniguchi isn't the kind of guy that easily gives in.

I had another plan running in parallel. I visited a high school located about an hour drive from Nadi. Rumors said this was a high school that Americans established over ten years ago. Moreover, the high school had decided to close it at such an exquisite timing. I tried contacting the principal of that high school, Tricia.

We have talked over the phone a few times, but this was the first time seeing her in person. Tricia was a charming and energetic woman, even from the eyes of a man much younger than her. She showed me around her school, which was a four-classroom building on a vast 11 acres of land. She was an educator and it was nearly ten years since she founded the special high school for students that refused to go to school.

I liked the environment of the school, so I cut to the chase.

"If you are thinking about closing the school, may I please have it?"

Tricia and I could not agree upon a price even after negotiations. She asked for 100 million yen for the land and building, as well the management rights of the high school. It was shortly after the Lehman shock, and I had no leisure to risk using such a large sum of money.

The project in the Yasawa Islands, which had been pursued in parallel, wasn't looking so great. It seemed that no matter how much we dug, no water was to be found.

If this was an ordinary person, he/she would non-reluctantly accept the failure of this plan. BUT Hiroshi Taniguchi isn't the kind of guy that easily gives in.

That was when I received a message from Ambassador Mataitoga of the Fiji Embassy in Japan, located in Tokyo.

According to Ambassador Mataitoga, there was a national high school called "Ba Provincial Secondary School" in the outskirts of Lautoka. The operation of the school was not going well, and he wanted me, with my expertise in school administration, to become the chairman of the school to rebuild it.

This offer agreed well with my plans to expand my business to high school education. I jumped at the offer and took the position as chairman to a school that I did not even know where it was located. I reported to the other board members after my reply. (lol)

This was a win-win situation for both of us. Fiji needed someone to take over the seat of chairman to rebuild this national high school, and I wanted to start my own high school.

I arranged my schedule to go and inspect the school as soon as I was possibly able to. Principal Baleilevuka, who was the former head teacher at Ratu Navula Secondary School and currently a board member at my language school, came with me to visit the school. The high school in subject was situated on the outskirts of a residential area beyond the hills of the Lautoka Golf Club. Even before entering the school gate, we could tell that the facility was tattered. Since we were able to see some students on the school grounds it did not reflect to us as "ruins”, but it was clearly obsolete.

We asked for the school principal and went around to see the classrooms and hostels with officials from the Ministry of Education. The facilities were in such a terrible state that it could hardly be called a school. The grounds were weedy and filled with litter which was either thrown there intentionally by students or landed there from somewhere else. There were no windows in their frames, and according to the principal's explanation, there was no water coming from the pipes and thus the toilets couldn't be flushed. About one-third of the desks and the chairs in the classroom were either broken or unusable in some other way. Lunch offered to the students at the hostel was soup (or more like a bowl of water) and sloppy, watery cassava potatoes.

I saw this and swore to myself I would somehow manage to reconstruct the school.

However, it wasn't just the facilities that were in poor condition. There were not enough textbooks in each classroom to support the teachers and the teachers had completely lost their enthusiasm to teach, and the students had lost their passion to learn. You could immediately tell just by looking into their eyes. They had lost their hope for better life.

It was a school that wasn't great in academics or sports.... or what the Japanese call as "rock-bottom school."

I looked into various issues of the school and noticed that these issues were quite deeply rooted. "Ba Provincial Secondary School" was a national high school founded in 1973 as soon as Fiji became independent from Britain. Although the employment of teachers was engaged by the government, the administration of school facilities and other faculty members were conducted by the school board (which I undertook as chairman) constituted by the local community.

At the time I undertook the school board, the government only funded a little for school administration, and instead a tuition was set to be collected from the students. This mechanism was a system transplanted from the UK to Fiji when it used to be under its colonial rule.

Though a tuition was set, it could not be set too high because Fiji is not a wealthy country. The total tuition per year was only 9,000 yen (180 Fiji dollars). This means it is 3,000 yen per semester.

In the financial report (though this was not an "official" statement because it has not been drafted at this school for a long time) submitted from the previous chairman when handing me over the tasks, it said that more than half of the students had not paid the semester tuition of only 3,000 yen. "More than half" was an understatement. It was more accurate to say, "the tuitions were hardly paid."

Under such financial situation, it was impossible to maintain this large school campus. It was beyond impossible to even think about setting up a computer room, science laboratory, or swimming pool. Anyone, even if they had no experience in managing, was able to tell you that.

We sent out reminder letters to the parents in effort to collect tuition fees.

When students came to try paying with cassava and taro potatoes, I changed my initial plan and announced the new plan I was considering. I started the first tuition-free high school in Fiji for Years 9 to 13 students in September 2010.

In February 2011, four months after I took office as chairman, I held a grand ceremony grandly at the high school. This is an episode on that ceremony.

In Fiji, drinks called Kava are essential for ceremonies and rituals. I have drunk these mud-water looking Kava drinks many times.

Kava is a luxury item, widely drunk in Fiji and island countries in the South Pacific, but it has disseminated into society and can now easily be obtained in the market. This drink was originally exclusive to the chiefs and only on special occasions, but recently it has become a drink for all people to drink and this has affected their ability to work well.

Kava is made from mixing the powdered root of the pepper plant with water. It doesn't look like anything but mud water. I can't really say it's tasteful. Living in Fiji for quite a while, I have acquired its taste. I was already familiar with the numb feeling in my tongue after drinking it.

The ceremony was ready to begin. A young boy dressed properly with a traditional Fijian waistband, brought a cup made from a coconut core cut in half. The Kava inside has a distinct sweet smell and leaves a powdery-ness similar to cornstarch in the mouth.

The Kava ceremony is similar to the formal tea rituals in Japan. The participants must create a void between their hands and clap once before and three times after swigging the Kava. Synching with that clap, the people surrounding the person claps four to five times and then pass the cup of Kava to the next person. Once the Kava drinking starts, it continues almost endlessly. In order to escape from the Kava party, people make up a variety of excuses such as his child suddenly becoming sick or leaving to use the bathroom and not returning. By the time its 2 am in the morning, there are only about two people left. Some are strong enough to wake their wives to have her cook a meal. Of course, no one can work the next day.

The ceremony that we held was intended to inform the people of Lautoka that I took office as Chairman of the national high school "Ba Provincial Secondary School."

The school started out with pane-less windows, water-less water pipes, and a school ground full of grass--- the grass has grown up to knee-height and we were able to catch eel in it after it rained. There were hardly any roofs that didn't leak. If it rained, even a little, every square of the classroom floor was wet. To top it off, the hostel students were offered soup lunches that only looked like a bowl of water...

For the past four months, I worked hard. I did everything I possibly could.

I had the holes in the roofs fixed, ordered new window frames with their panes, asked a janitor to repaint the school, and created a small farming area near the school by improving the soil with chicken manure containing phosphorus and coral containing silicon. In order to make sure that the hostel students actually had vegetables or meat in their soup, I asked the agricultural chemistry teacher two months prior to start self-cultivation of tomatoes, okras, and eggplants.

No matter how many times the water pipes were fixed, there was not enough water pressure. So, we had a well dug in the corner of the school grounds. At first the Fijian teachers and school staff were just watching us do our work. Gradually, they started helping out. Once the teachers regained their liveliness, then the students regained theirs as well.

Regarding the meat for the soup lunches, it was difficult to find a meat shop that met with our school budget. So, I went to a slaughterhouse outside the town and bought meat of the cheapest internal organs. Fijians were hesitant to eat meat of internal organs. I brought a manual mincing machine from Japan and gently mixed it in with the soup in a state where the children wouldn't even notice that there was meat in it. Just like any parent would do to have their child eat vegetables that they did not like, such as peppers and carrots.

Much to my pleasure, students were delighted to find the pieces of meat in their soup and kept repeating how delicious it was.

This "rock-bottom" school in the city of Lautoka, the second largest city in the Republic of Fiji, transformed itself in matter of four months. Or at least the visible parts of the school did. The sparkles in the students’ eyes told us everything.

There is a total of 162 high schools in Fiji, including both public and private, but this was of course the first school to have a Japanese chairman. The first time I visited Fiji was in December 2002, around Christmastime. Back then, I would have never guessed I would be living here, let alone be running a national high school as its chairman. It was very touching, with a bit of a tingling feeling, to be standing there that night being celebrated.

I was reflecting back on the memories I had in Fiji and was feeling a little sentimental while drinking down the Kava I received. Though I had been accustomed to the taste, it still left an unpleasant taste. The aftertaste of Kava started spreading in my mouth, and due to its relaxing effect, my tongue started feeling numb.

I handed back the coconut cup back to the young boy who handed it to me in the first place and clapped my cupped hands three times, expressing my gratitude in Fiji style.

　I heard the loud applause by the students and guests echo throughout the venue.

The Kava cup made its way back to the chief guests, Honorable Bole from Fiji's Ministry of Education and Ambassador Yoshizawa from the Japanese Embassy in Fiji.

After me, Chairman Saukuru of Fiji's western district council swigged down the Kava to officially start the ceremony.

In a Kava ceremony, once everybody has their drink, there is some leisure time and then the next round of drinking starts again. In cases such as this formal ceremony, guest speeches follow the first round of the Kava cup. The Minister of Education gave a speech, highly acknowledging the waiving of tuition and extensive renovation of the school. The vice principal of the high school came up to tell me that it would soon be my turn to give a speech.

The timing soon came. I was called to the stage. After they had introduced me, I walked up on stage to the microphone set in front of our guests. I picked up the microphone, bowed and started my speech. The following is that speech (abridged):

Ni Sa Bula Vinaka! (meaning "hello" in Fiji language)

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen. Minister for Education Honorable Fillipe Bole, Japanese Ambassador to Fiji Mr. Yutaka Yoshizawa, and Chairman of Ba Provincial Council Ratu Meli, Saukuru, and all invited guest members of the Ba Provincial Council, Ba Holdings and all friends in Lautoka and Nadi.

It is my great pleasure to be here. Today, I would like to show my respect to Great Fijian Hospitality and show you our new vision today. One year ago, no one here could imagine we are here. Even I didn’t. Not many people… not many students here knew us at that time. Not many teachers here knew us at that time.

One time, I asked a student here "Who is the most famous Japanese who you know?" I was very shocked to hear he just answered like. "Jackie Chen!"

(A very loud laugh from the crowd)

I tell you something. Jackie Chen is not Japanese. He is a Chinese actor. But with very much help, warm help from Ministry of Education we are getting very popular in Nadi and Lautoka. very. Now even taxi drivers, cassava farmers in market tell me "I like what you are doing in Fiji." and they really appreciate us and give us good price for our school.

OK, Students who stay in our hostel: Last night, did you taste your dinner in our hostel?

(From the hostel students: YES!)

What did you see in your plate?

(From students: "Meat! Big fat meat!")

Yes. Big piece of meat! Big piece of meat! 　Before we could only buy ten kilograms of meat in a week, but we negotiated with Abattoir in Vuda, and they agree to give their cheaper meat, so we can provide 40 kilograms of meat every week. Four times bigger than before! Did you enjoy it?

(The students answered: "Yes! They were delicious!!")

Vinaka. Vinaka.

Now our students are planting vegetables farm in our new farm over there. Cassava, cucumber, okra, tomato, pumpkin, pawpaw, banana, long bean, and French beans ...... You work hard, you can have better foods. Education is something similar to vegetable farming. You work hard, you can have better foods, not only better foods, you can have better life, if you work harder.

So, students and teachers, please understand, this school will be one of most strict school in Fiji. And try to support your hard working. The management, we have already asked our Principal Mr. Tawake (the first principal appointed since I took over as chairman) to change the school atmosphere. So, he is going to change the school culture soon. So, you have to watch out! You may feel it is bit too strict... But I am sure…if you start to work in the community, you could feel more stress... So, I'd like you to get used in our community in Ba Pro, then flight away to the community in Fiji. I believe everyone here can reach your dream with education that we are providing you, and your hard working.

This school is the only school, that has No school fee. It is very well known now. I read newspaper last week; The Honorable Minister [Bole] mentioned "School shouldn’t charge a lot of money to students." I really appreciated it. It is truth. Yes, when 3rd semester started in September last year, we were trying to collect the school fee. But only few students brought some money. Some didn’t have cash. So, they brought some cassava to the school instead of money.

But we followed the Ministry of Education Management Guide. We didn’t expel any student with this reason. I think those students are just victims. We should do something before we just expel those students. Then I recommended to our management board and I said, "Ba Pro will be the first school in Fiji [with] NO charge school fee" and they all agreed with it.

So, we started "No [tuition] Fee"…"Free education" in this school. But to maintain our huge compound, and employ all expertly staff, we need something.

Yes, it is money.

We will co-operate with foreign company and accommodate foreign students. Japanese, Korea, and Chinese students here in Ba Pro.

We don’t charge you anything, but you have to work.

You have to work.

Your job description is very simple, just provide your "Great Fijian Hospitality." Please provide some more Hospitality to our foreign students here.

Then we can keep on provide Free Education to you.

Don't forget! We are learning [from] each other. We are helping each other.

I will do my best to give the best to all local and international students in our school.

My vision is to make Ba Provincial College, the new name Ba Provincial Free Bird Institute, one of the top five schools in Fiji in five years' time.

(A large round of applause from the audience.)

Vinaka! I believe we can achieve this vision if we all work together and all work harder.

Remember! Slogan of the school! "Faith moves mountains."

Thank you for listening. Vinaka Vaka Levu.

In 2014, three years after this speech, my school, the "Ba Provincial Free Bird Institute", won the rugby national tournament that all 162 high schools in Fiji participate in. They won again in 2015. As for academics, in 2016, our school ranked 6th out of 162 schools for the common national academic ability test.

Where there's a will there's a way.

In 2015, four years after this speech, Minister for Education Honorable Bole, who had attended the ceremony, made all public high schools in Fiji tuition free.

After I took position of chairman, my high school made great advancement in both academic and sports. I had studied about things I had never studied before such as well digging, soil improvements for vegetable gardening, and nutrition science. I paid visits everywhere, from the Ministry of Education to slaughterhouses, for better maintenance of the school. I would be at my wits end if it hadn't excelled considering all I have done(lol).

Of course, I was happy to see our Fijian students excelling in their studies, but it was exhilarating to see that the way students from Japan viewed life change from its foundation.

I myself do not yet have any children. I sometimes ask myself if I have been able to leave my footprints in this world as a living creature.

Of course, technically speaking, the biological heredity of 'Hiroshi Taniguchi' will become extinct if I do not have children. However, when designing education for a language school and high school, I just don't feel like 'Hiroshi Taniguchi' will become extinct.

As of now, there won't be anyone related to me in genetic terms. Nevertheless, by sharing time and values together, there are gradually more people that started thinking like me and behaving like me at the schools. They are not my children by blood, but they are my children by love. I feel the same way toward my employees. By sharing time and values together, each and every one is becoming a little bit weirder like me (lol).

Nearly half of the high school students from Japan were children who were uneasy at the schools in their home country. I will not deny the fact that Japanese education is truly wonderful, but it is absolutely stressful for weirdos like them and myself to be forced to behave and think with same values. These are the children that I want to help out, to provide them a place to live freely in a free country like Fiji.

Although there are facilities such as science labs, cooking spaces for home economics, and computer rooms, they are not as fine as those found in Japanese high schools. However, our school is the best environment to think on your own, soak into deep thoughts, and dream about your aspirations. Ironically, it's the shortcomings of the facility that offer such valuable opportunities to the children. It is up to the child to decide what that opportunity is for!

I think this is the greatest distinction with Japanese education and also the essences of what education should offer.

"There is something that I feel more important than improving their English or academic skills. I want the students to cry out loud when they have to leave school, when they have to leave Fiji. What we should aim to become is 'Disneyland' rather than a school! 　We have to make everyone feel that they do not yet want to go home!"

Fortunately, I frequently see students crying in the departure lobby of the airport, surrounded by friends and homestay families. I can't ask for more!

There is another great thing. My school is a national high school in the former UK and the current British Commonwealth Republic of Fiji. This plays a big role. Graduates of my high school are exempted from TOEIC and IELTS testing that are normally mandated to Japanese students when they apply for universities in English-speaking countries. When advancing to a Japanese university, they are qualified to take entrance exams as returnees or AO special exams.

When I first started the school, I had not given this much thought. However, the advantage of being qualified as a returnee or Admission Office applicant is big. It has helped increase Japanese applicants.

Of course, it depends on the student's own academic ability, but by using the special examination system, the students are able to enter a "higher-ranking" university than the universities that would have been a more practical choice if they had continued studying in Japan. Starting with Waseda University and some prestigious private Universities (Meiji, Aoyama, Rikkyo, Chuo, and Housei University), many of our Japanese students advance to famous universities every year. This is probably because Japanese universities want to enroll more global students who can speak English. By admitting graduates from my high school, students surrounding them will be stimulated by their peers' global ways of thinking.

But it is truly hard to look after the students. Especially because their fathers and mothers are in Japan and have little understanding of Fijian culture. They cannot objectively perceive the small incidents that happened in Fiji and cannot rationally judge from information that is reported to them by their own children. The hardships of the study abroad counselors are beyond the parents' imagination.

　As aforementioned, there is a mutual aid culture in Fiji called "Kerekere” where it is quite common for someone to be using your belongings or simply gone. Either way, it is perceived as "stealing" in the parents' eyes and we have difficulty explaining this culture to them.

In many of today's high schools in Japan, the viewpoints of students and teachers are much closer and in some cases the authority is reversed. Many parents, familiar with that culture, often criticize strictness of the Fijian teachers or hold the school responsible for misdemeanors of their child such as smoking or drinking when it was the child's choice to do so. I feel these criticisms are unreasonable.

On the other hand, it is a very fulfilling job.

Students who would have dropped out if they continued attending high school in Japan are touched by the affection of Fijians and their view of life completely turns around. In most cases, they mature enough to become considerate of the counselors. The students take good care of others who are sliding if left alone, show leadership by taking the initiative to become school committee members, and when they hear about their admittance to universities, they make sure I am the first to know. At my high school, there is a sense of unity that has been lost in high schools in Japan.