

Proposing Subject Specialization for Fijian Primary Schools

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Abstract

Fijian education system has different teacher education programmes for secondary and primary school teachers. Whilst both categories study theories of education, the major differences are in their specialisations. The primary school teacher studies applied education during which he/she has to learn to teach all the subjects found in the primary school curriculum. On the other hand, the secondary school student teacher needs to specialise in two teaching subject out of all the subjects offered in the secondary school curriculum. In practice, primary school teachers are in charge of the whole class, teaching all subjects, whereas secondary school teachers deliver lessons in specific topics only. It is argued here that the arrangement in primary school system needs to change from creating a general teacher to that of a subject specialist to enhance student achievement and teacher specialization.

Introduction

Fiji has experienced a continuing increase in school enrolments, beginning at the primary level and continuing onto the secondary level. Between 1969, when the Royal Commission on Education reported, and 1999 the number of students in the local primary schools rose from 116,154 to 144,284 (an increase of 24.22% or an annual increase averaging 0.8%) while secondary enrolments increased from 13,795 to 68,229 during the same period (an increase of 394.5% or an average annual increase of 13%). A major concern of successive governments since independence has been to ensure equality of access to educational facilities for all children. The Ministry of Education has devoted much of its efforts towards responding to the pressures from the main providers of education

to make more funds and facilities available to cope with increases in enrolments. One outcome has been that Fiji has made significant achievements in ensuring that all groups in the country have access to education at the primary and secondary levels (Education Commission, 2000).

Efforts to improve quality were subsumed by pressing needs to meet the demands of quantitative expansion. Training of teachers has been extended and upgraded in the last three decades. Curricular at both primary and secondary levels have been reviewed and localised during this time. Educational policy-making has, however, been essentially reactive rather than proactive, as a result of the pressures to extend and improve existing educational provisions.

According to the Education Commission (2000), there are three educational goals on which Fiji needs to focus: to ensure the provision of increased access to educational facilities for the groups that have so far been left behind; to move towards improving the quality and relevance of the educational programmes that it now offers; and to strive towards achieving greater equality of learning outcomes for students in all areas of the country. Learning outcomes here refers to the overall performance of students, not only their academic achievements. Education has often contributed to laying the foundations for a strong and vibrant democracy. It has also tended to pave the way for freedom and equal rights for all citizens, which are pre-requisites for harmonious relationships among the various groups in the country.

The introduction of subject specialisation is well known within the secondary system in Fiji. But not much has been written on or discussed in Fiji on subject specialisation in primary schools. This paper proposes that for quality education, subject specialization ought to include primary schools.

Definition of Subject Specialist

A subject specialist in the school system would be one who has obtained at least a bachelor degree in one or two teaching subjects or a degree with majors in one or two teaching subjects, and thereafter being appointed to teach these subjects. Other subjects which students need to study would be taught by team mates who are specialists in those subjects. A likely combination in a secondary school setting for subject pairs would be maths and science or commerce, or language art and social studies. In some settings, commerce and social sciences (like Economics and History) may go together too.

Subject specialization would enable the teachers to reach more stu-

dents by focusing on their best subjects and teaching those subjects to two or more classes of students, rather than just one. Teachers would save time needed for expanded student reach by narrowing their subject coverage. Students gain by having specialists teach them.

For primary schools in Fiji, the norm has been specialisation in terms of levels, rather than specific subjects; levels are generally lower-primary level (covering grades one to four), and upper-primary (covering grades five to eight). There, however, is no policy statement defining these levels. At the end, the teacher is provided with department related specialisation, but remains a generalist in terms of subject coverage. The level specialist would teach all subjects in the specific class he/she would be allocated.

Why Subject Specialisation?

The philosophy behind subject specialisation is derived from the *Theory of Scientific Management* as advocated by Frederick W. Taylor and Max Weber. They advocated a hierarchical structure in organisations, division of labour, rules to control the behaviour of members, impersonal relations and career orientation. Subject specialisation is based on the notion of division of labour. The idea of subject specialisation allows teachers to focus on one or two subjects. Under this they would be able to reach a wide range of pupils in their subject area. As noted by Kapfunde (2000), at school level subject specialisation provides an opportunity for a teacher to specialise in doing that single task which ensures efficiency in production. In this regard subject specialisation is credited with improving quality of education and efficiency in education production.

Specialisation entails breaking each job into smaller tasks that are manageable. Since subject specialisation in education fits well into one of the principles of the scientific management theory, subject specialisation also aims at improving education production. According to Kasher (2005) specialisation involves intentional narrowing of practice which contributes to competent delivery of service in education. The focus of both Kapfunde (2000) and Kasher (2005) on specialisation is on the improvement of teaching and learning. As noted above, subject specialisation at primary school is a form of division of labour. As such, it is envisaged to increase education production as each teacher can concentrate on what he/she is good at. This helps the teacher to develop expertise in the area of focus.

Specialisation in education is expected to improve efficiency, output and outcomes. It is expected to increase both teacher and pupil perform-

ances. This should then contribute to high pass rates as indicators of high output in schools.

Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) raise important arguments on the role of subject specialisation in schools. For them subject specialisation improves performance of the teacher, school and pupil. This comes about as subject specialisation gives the teacher a strong grounding in the area of specialisation. Such grounding makes the teacher relevant, effective, and efficient as the teacher becomes knowledgeable in the subject area and an expert on the subject matter. If this argument holds true, we should then expect an improvement in the performance and quality of the passes in primary schools that have adopted the specialisation model when compared with those that still follow the generalist model.

Pine (2012) made interesting observations about education systems in China and the United States, noting that elementary schools in China have subject specialists while the US elementary school teachers are generalists. The specialists in China specialise on both, the subject and on how to teach the said subject. A notable disadvantage of the Chinese model were that relations between the teacher and the pupil were impersonal, which may be detrimental to the development of young children. The system does not allow the teacher time to know and understand his/her children. Dealing with young children goes beyond the call of duty. The teacher has to find time to study strengths, weaknesses and needs of the children. The American system of education provides for this. As such, the system is able to provide for such, which contributes to the total development of the child (Pine, 2012).

The primary school stage, like all levels of development, is critical in the development of a child. This should be handled with great care. Nash, Stock and Harper (1990) identified five developmental stages. These are: infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. All the stages are characterised by domains that contribute to development and change in the individual. Such developmental domains include the physical developmental domains, cognitive developmental domain, and psychosocial development domains. The development of the different domains is the responsibility of the family, community and the school.

The middle childhood stage mostly covers children between the ages of 6 and 12 years. These are primary school going ages. At this stage, apart from assisting children acquire knowledge and skills, which may be catered for through subject specialisation, the children have to be helped to develop moral values and to grow in social relationships. In line with psychodynamic theories which focus on how an individual develops

a personality, the role of the teacher goes beyond teaching. The teacher has to nurture the child at primary school level. The major question is therefore, whether subject specialisation can provide for such nurturing.

Benefits of Subject Specialization

Both well-performing and struggling schools can benefit from subject specialisation. Schools with a typical number of excellent teachers may be able to close small but persistent gaps completely, without diminishing results for other students. Struggling schools can produce catch-up gains on a deliberately planned schedule by helping the best available teachers reach designated students each year, again without diminishing outcomes for other students.

Schools may implement subject specialization in some grades or subjects or across the whole school. This approach may allow teachers who are excellent in one core subject pair (for example, math/science), but not the other (for example language arts/social studies) to produce excellent results by focusing on their areas of strength. Schools may choose to have all teachers specialize by subject regardless of their prior effectiveness, to allow all teachers to focus their efforts on a narrower range of content.

By specializing, teachers may reach more students while maintaining or gaining planning time. For example, primary teachers in most schools today spend about eight of their nearly 32 instructional hours weekly on math and science combined. Under the specialization approach, excellent math/science teachers can teach up to four classes. However, by limiting reach to three classes of students, these teachers may gain up to eight in-school planning hours weekly. A second set of excellent teachers could teach two classes of combined language arts and social studies, on which teachers now spend about 14 hours weekly, potentially gaining up to four planning hours weekly. Classroom specialists need to collaborate to monitor and ensure students' overall development, which includes their academic, social, emotional, behavioural, and time-management skills.

Role and Schedule Changes for Primary Subject Teachers

Teachers who produce excellent results in one or two related subjects specialize in those subjects. Schools have other subjects and many administrative and other non-instructional tasks for teachers. By taking off these tasks from teachers' workloads, their schedules will get focused

entirely on planning and teaching the designated subject(s), monitoring student learning, and collaborating with other teachers and staff to ensure student learning and development. As in most secondary schools today, either teachers would rotate from one classroom to the next on a schedule, or students rotate through their classrooms on a schedule.

Under this approach, far more students would get the best core subject teachers already available in a school. This can benefit advanced, average, and struggling students equally, depending on how students are assigned to the excellent, core specialized teachers who extend their reach.

Specialized teachers work with multiple classes of students. Schools must coordinate schedules across affected classrooms, regardless of whether the specializing teachers or students switch rooms. Math teachers may be able to extend their reach further than language arts teachers in schools that maintain the current time allocations among subjects. Scheduling and staffing levels will need to accommodate differences in reach accordingly (for example, three or four classes for each math/science teacher and two classes for each language arts/social studies teacher).

The Policy and Regulations Guiding Subject Specialisation

The introduction of subject specialisation at primary schools would require authorisation from the Ministry of Education, and policy changes on the part of the government. Such change would focus not only on the teaching aspect in primary schools, but also on teacher education programmes. The latter would need to produce subject specialist teachers for primary school levels.

In developing relevant policies and regulations it is important to take note of various stakeholders in Education. There is a need to consider the role of teacher training colleges in the new paradigm. Issues that would need clarity would be on whether teacher training colleges would need to continue training primary school teachers in all the primary school curriculum subjects, or adopt the secondary school training institution approach in which student teachers specialise in the teaching of two subjects.

In Zimbabwe, where this matter has received attention, whilst there was no clear evidence in terms of the policy documents that introduced subject specialisation at primary school, policy documents were developed on the number of written exercises and the number of hours that the specialist teacher had to work (Jowawa, 2012).

Subject Specialisation and Pupils' Performance

Primary education has specific objectives. These may differ from country to country. Such objectives include an improvement in access to education, relevance of the curriculum needs of the child, equality of access, inclusive education, and recognition of children's rights. There are various arguments pertaining to the purpose of primary education and indeed schooling as a whole. If we were to focus on John Dewey's argument for schooling, we could then view primary school education as providing children an opportunity to live pragmatically and immediately in their current environment.

There are at least two key issues that can be considered as relevant in our present day understanding of education. These are the intended beneficiaries of the education system and how they benefit. What stands out in Dewey's philosophy and the way he explains the purpose of education and schooling is the relevance of what we teach children and how this helps them in their day to day life. In other words, education is of little value if it does not help us to address the problems confronting us every day, thus the emphasis on pragmatism. Such pragmatism is promoted through independence of the individual. An aspect that deserves attention is Dewey's reference to the current environment. Whilst it might have been easy during his time to define 'current environment', this is not the case today. There has been advancement in technology to such an extent that the world has become a global village. In that respect, the world has become the 'current environment'. In contrast stands Adler's (1982) views. He gives three objectives for education. Education has to develop citizenship within children; it also has to contribute to the personal growth of the individual, and make preparation for occupation in life.

There are different views on the purpose of education; however, the need for measurement of the achievement of the objectives needs to be kept in mind. There is a need to measure performance of the education system in relation to the set objectives. Types of performance measures include outcome measures, intermediate outcome measures, output measures, process measures and input measures.

Within this context, outcome measures involve assessing performance of pupils in terms of examination performance. In this regard, in Zimbabwe, two school heads were asked to indicate their grade seven percentage pass rates; both the schools had embarked on subject specialisation from 2010. Their pass rates from 2009 to 2013 were given as 33%, 48%, 55%, 62%, and 62.5%, respectively, for the church-related primary school in Chegutu, and 45%, 50%, 55%, 62%, and 65%, respectively, for

the government school in Mufakose (Samkange, 2015). The results for both primary schools show that there had been consistent improvements in the performance of grade seven pupils in public examinations. However, it is noted that there are many factors that contribute to improvements in performance at school levels. But the results are striking enough to indicate that a change from generalised teaching to subject specialisation could be a contributory factor to an improvement in educational output.

Concluding Remarks

Fiji follows a generalist model of education at the primary school level. Once appointed to schools, teachers are then slotted in either the lower primary or the upper primary level. This system has continued since formal primary education began in the country. There are countries which have different approaches to primary school education. Two countries mentioned in this paper are China and Zimbabwe. These and other country experiences need to be taken into account in re-looking at the Fijian system. Japanese primary education system also offers considerable information.

This paper proposes that Fiji consider subject specialisation for primary school teachers. Major challenges related to subject specialisation at primary schools would relate to the degree of specialisation that needs to be offered at teacher training institutions, and expectations at schools. It is important that teachers specialise in at least two subjects at teacher training institutions. They will then teach these subjects in the schools. There will, of course, remain some challenges associated with the implementation of subject specialisation at primary schools. Considering the pastoral roles of primary schools, teachers will need to continue to contribute to this in view of the young age of the pupils.

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