

neglect of important curricular and co-curricular activities that quality teaching entails.

Recruitment and Qualification of Teachers

'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). The survey of education systems across fifty countries by Barber and Mourshed (2007) further posited it had never seen the education system achieve world class status without top talent in its teaching profession. Teachers count in affecting education quality.

In Fiji teacher education is not attracting top students into teacher profession. Upon discussion with many teacher trainees, it was revealed that teaching was their last and only option left to get into paid employment. It was neither their wish nor their choice to become a teacher.

While teaching profession is seen as the mother of all professions, students are attracted to other professions which offer better remuneration and work conditions. Most teachers prefer to graduate at the completion of diploma programme with minority going onto degree level studies.

Leadership

Leadership is a single factor that has influence on the education system. In the school system leaders should be good role models, be able to motivate staff and provide adequate support and mentoring to the staff to ensure quality teaching and learning in the classrooms. They should be ethical and have good decision making skills. With my experience as a practicum coordinator, I have witnessed that with a good leader, the weakest teachers are able to raise the bar to commitment to teaching. On the contrary some very able teacher's performance takes a nosedive due to lack of support, guidance, motivation and mentoring provided on the part of their mediocre leaders.

The report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission (2000) recommended that newly appointed school leadership should undertake professional training on educational leadership and administration before taking up their posts. Unfortunately a number of leaders picked lack significant professionalism in them. It is rather unfortunate that some have been rewarded with leadership roles due to their regular visit to district education offices and being faithful to the calls of the leadership at education offices, some have been rewarded due to their 'roots', others due to their affiliations with teacher unions and some through involvement in co-

Raising and Sustaining the Quality of Teaching in Fiji Classrooms¹

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Abstract

Teachers are seen as the most important agent in nation building. With major concern by stakeholders at declining student performance in schools, it is vital that student performance be given high priority. A critical issue is: how to raise and maintain the quality of teaching in schools. Recruitment and qualification of teachers, leadership, curriculum, teacher-student ratio, reflective practice by teachers, professional development of teachers, emphasis on co-curricular activities, and teacher retirement policy have profound effects in achieving desired standards and quality. This paper discusses these issues.

Introduction

The genesis of this presentation is my personal observations of declining teaching quality in both primary and secondary schools in Fiji. The observations, personal experiences and frequent conversations with teachers and stakeholders left me with something to despair. One is constantly reminded of the declining student performance in schools. While the Ministry of Education is consistently being concerned with the present problem, there needs a lot more to be done.

Firstly the paper will present an analysis of the major factors that need consideration and respond to the question; what is really happening and why. From this I'll draw some conclusions and try to answer the question: what we learn from these experiences? Finally I'll present a synthesis of the findings and make recommendations taking into account

¹ This paper was presented during the National Education conference at Fiji National University, Lautoka campus on 7 November, 2014.

curricular activities. It's pertinent to note that some very deserving teachers who would become very good leaders are ignored as they sincerely do their work in schools and don't meet any of the 'unethical' criteria above.

Curriculum

We are now past the first decade of the twenty first century. Much has changed: the way we socialise, the way we learn about global events, the way we search for information and how we spend our leisure time. There is one sector in our society that keeps its feet stubbornly entrenched in the previous century- the education sector. It is ironical to state that while mobile phones are upgraded every few months for the sake of technological progress, there is no similar commitment to education. Our curriculum remains stagnant for decades. In 2013, I established that the same social studies curriculum had been used in Fiji classroom over three decades (Chand, 2013).

Teacher- student ratio

The student-teacher ratio has increased radically in the urban centres as more and more people are migrating to these centres in search of better job opportunities and services. In some classrooms the teacher is burdened to teach as many as fifty students or more, compromising both quality teaching and one to one support to the students. On the same note some leaders are to be blamed. In order to receive more government grants in some secondary schools, the principals are getting as much enrolment as possible. They create much imbalance in student-teacher ratio and put unnecessary pressure on school resources.

Reflective practice by teachers

Assuring the quality of teaching and learning in schools is currently a major concern amongst providers, politicians and the stakeholders. One of the ways of assuring this is by reflective practice done by teachers. Peterson (1988) states that the art of being reflective is not simply the application of techniques and skills but involves the art of reflection about teaching. The British Council (2011) defined reflective teaching as a means of looking at what teachers do in the classroom, thinking about what they do, and how they work. Through reflective teaching, teachers are able to lead to changes and improvements in their teaching strategies.

Students are often blamed for their mediocre or below standard performance. To improve on their practice, teachers must continuously reflect on their work to optimise student learning.

Workshops and Professional development of teachers

Workshops are held to train teachers. This is especially done while trying to familiarise them with something innovative. The timing of the workshops and poor planning by the different units of the Ministry of Education has seen that teachers are informed of workshops few hours from the start of the programme. As a result without setting any work to the students, the teachers leave their classrooms unattended for a number of days. Some workshops are conducted towards the end of the year which has very little impact on the transformation of teachers to become change agents that they are supposed to become. While it is compulsory that teachers are equipped with the necessities for effective delivery in their classrooms, this must not take place at the expense of the valuable teaching time.

Co- curricular activities and other programmes

Co-curricular activities help towards the holistic development of the child. These must remain an integral part of the curriculum. Whenever any co-curricular activity or other programmes eventuate, teaching time is compromised. Hours and sometimes days and weeks are spent on rehearsals, preparations and activities. While no major research has been conducted on the number of hours teachers teach constructively especially in primary schools, there are some teachers who are significantly involved in co-curricular activities, spending their time outside their classrooms neglecting their teaching duties.

Retirement of teachers

The compulsory retirement age for civil servants in Fiji is fifty- five years. While most teachers gracefully retire, there are some who hold on to their positions as their terms are extended. This causes a lot of disgruntlement amongst the senior staff within the school.

Some Thoughts on Required Actions

Given the above observations it would be effortless to point out the

contributing factors that compromises in the education system. It certainly seems that a lot has to be done in order to achieve quality teaching in classrooms to raise student performance.

Firstly the qualification of teachers cannot be compromised. Research has shown that highly qualified teachers bring the best amongst their students. Finland, being the number one nation in education in the world, allows only the best students to join the teacher training institutions. Students are attracted to teacher training due to the pay offered in teaching. The other requirement from the Finland experience is that all teachers possess Masters qualification in order to be prepared for teaching in their classrooms. Fiji cannot be lagging behind for too long.

The first recommendation, therefore would be that only the best must be accepted in the teaching profession. Salary must be attractive so that teaching becomes the preferred choice of those seeking higher qualifications. In order to teach successfully in primary and secondary schools all teachers must raise their minimum qualification to degree level (with teacher training) and attain Masters qualification within their first ten years of teaching. Regular professional development of teachers and in-service training must remain a priority for the Ministry of Education.

Secondly the recent event of regularisation where teachers placed in positions were advantaged to the disadvantage of some very senior officers who were missed out and were not considered for redress. The process was not rectified to assist the disadvantaged. Similarly some leaders who were unprofessional and underperforming were transferred to other institutions or even promoted to act on higher positions. The Ministry of Education should not protect or reward such underperforming and unprofessional officers through transferring them to other institutions or promoting them.

Thus the second recommendation is that leadership must be merit based. Years of service, qualification and performance ratings over the years must be considered towards promotion. It should be mandatory that all leaders and potential leaders while having degree qualification also have a post-graduate or masters qualification in Ethics and Educational Leadership. Proven under-performing and unprofessional leaders need to be downgraded, placed at a lower salary and disciplined as per the case or asked to seek professional development. A policy regarding this must be developed to guide the leaders.

Thirdly we live in a global village; change that happens in one part of the world affects one and all. Taufe'ulungaki (2002) states that educational change and curriculum change in the region has originally been in-

fluenced by international movements in education. The change people witness happening around them and in different parts of the world, lead them to want to see that their schools change what they deliver to cater for this.

Thus the third recommendation is that curriculum must be revised at regular intervals to meet the changing expectations of the students, the society and the job market. A curriculum committee comprising of academics from different subject areas (from major universities and teacher training colleges) with the designated curriculum development officer must hold regular meetings to keep abreast with the change requirements in curriculum for specific subject areas. A teacher or two from each district should be appointed as a subject rep for different subject areas, who in turn receive the views of other teachers in the district. A bi-annual meeting could be held at the national level in each subject area with district teacher reps, academics, other stakeholders and curriculum development officers.

Fourthly, large class size remains a concern for urban schools in Fiji. The report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission (2000) recommended that the teacher-student ratio for single grade be 1:30 with 40 as maximum for primary schools. Fourteen years has elapsed but this recommendation has not been implemented. While most parents are prioritising urban schools over rural schools for their children's education, preference must remain for schools within the zone. This should materialize if rural schools are posted with exceptional leaders, good teaching staff and are equipped with better facilities.

Thus the fourth recommendation is that the recommendations of the Education Commission on teacher-student ratio should be effected at the earliest so that classrooms are not overcrowded. To cater for increasing number of students in urban centres more classrooms must be built with increased staff capacity to overcome the teacher-student ratio problem. Some very good teachers with better incentives must be posted to rural schools to raise the standard of work carried out so as to attract students in rural schools thus avoiding overcrowding in urban schools

Fifthly, as Elliot (1991) states, reflective practice can be formally encouraged and directed as action research. In essence action research is being systematic about changing ones' teaching and making sure the changes are in the right direction; that students are learning better than they used to.

Thus the fifth recommendation is that teachers should be provided adequate training to be reflective practitioners in their classrooms. Teacher training institutions must fully equip teacher trainees on the im-

portance of reflective teaching and instill how these can be effectively used in classrooms.

Sixthly workshops are normally conducted when the Ministry of Education comes up with some new initiatives or when there are some modifications done in their existing programme. Teachers are called to attend these workshops at very short notices, and at times too many workshops are held within a very short timeframe. This results in teachers leaving their class unattended. The workshops held should not compromise teaching time and at the same time its outcome must be effectively implemented in the classroom soon after the workshop.

Thus the sixth recommendation is that any new programme introduced or reforms undertaken must go through a thorough phase of training. As many teachers as possible should be invited to attend workshops. Outcomes of workshops should not be impacted by a few peoples' world-views. Considering that quality teaching time cannot be compromised, all workshops must be held in school holidays. Furthermore where single day workshops during the term are required, these must take place on a Friday or possibly Saturday. Teachers must be informed of the dates in advance. Teachers who attend trainings and workshops in the holidays must be rewarded with reasonable allowances; this would attract better participation. Similarly all workshops conducted must be assessed to evaluate the knowledge imparted and the knowledge gained by teachers. Teachers are bound to conduct professional development sessions in their schools. Teachers who do not perform well must be directed to enhance their learning and this to be noted in their professional files.

Seventh, in school much of the teaching time is replaced by co-curricular activities. Co-curricular classes should be a routine and carried out on a regular basis. However, it has been noted that when there is an outside activity, for example, camping or a national awareness campaign to be organised, schools tend to focus all their attention on preparations for these. Hence valuable teaching time is lost. Moreover, participating in competitive sports like rugby, soccer, netball and athletics put immense pressure on student learning. Part of teaching time is used for training sessions. Students are called on Saturdays or asked to stay late in the afternoons to participate in games due to Ministry of Education's ruling that all sporting activities are to be organized outside teaching hours. This brings students away from their homes when they were required to be at their homes, and places teachers with extra responsibilities in the name of duty of care. I vividly recall a meet with the SEO at CDU sometime ago mentioning that competitive sports was never part of the physical educa-

tion curriculum. According to the officer, all students were to be equally given a chance to play games required to be physically fit. According to him students identified with exceptional talents in any sporting activities are to be referred to national sporting bodies to harness their skills. If this eventuates it will definitely get students undivided attention to studies and teaching time will not be compromised as well.

Thus the seventh recommendation is that all co-curricular activities must be timetabled. Activities which affect schools for a short period of time should be catered for by shortened periods (perturbations) and rigorously adhered to. None of the teaching subjects for the day ought to be compromised. Leaders should receive further training to manage this.

Eighth, while retirement age is fixed for any civil servant, the experiences held by retirees cannot be entirely substituted. Subject to excellent performance and good health conditions, some leaders may be engaged to guide underperforming institutions and mentor other staff.

Thus the eighth recommendation is that since years of experience cannot be replaced, the best teachers with proven records be retained by the Ministry to raise the standard of education in the country. They must only be placed in underperforming schools where their expertise is needed the most. Their performance must be reviewed on bi-annual basis for continuity of their contracts.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Lest stakeholders in education feel that I have raised too many issues neglecting some important ones, let me state that this list is not exhaustive but contains only the high priority ones. Secondly some stakeholders may feel that the recommendations are obvious or straight common sense. The intent here is to re-iterate these so that these are actually looked at by the Ministry.

Student performance ought not to decline on account of compromised quality of teaching and the time spent in classrooms. Teachers make the most difference in the lives of the students and in classroom learning. It is imperative that the opportunities for improvement are worked on and strengthened. The quality of teachers to enable quality teaching should remain a high priority for the Ministry of Education.

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