

Report Content

After the preliminaries on method, etc., the Report examines the notion of the 'ideal Fijian teacher' and finds that there was consensus amongst the stakeholders on what an ideal Fijian teacher was. Eight features were identified. An 'Ideal Fijian Teacher':

1. is guided by the expectations of national policies, standards and curricula.
2. has a strong sense of teacher identity and is guided by professional ethics and moral standards.
3. has a passion for teaching and facilitating student learning.
4. is cognisant of cultural, social and learning contexts in the classroom.
5. is well versed with subject content knowledge.
6. keeps up to date with pedagogical developments, is innovative and applies a wide range of teaching strategies to enhance student learning.
7. prioritises student learning needs and safety.
8. sees a value for education beyond the schooling experience.

The Report then moves to examine the reasons for teachers choosing that vocation, with preponderance of 'calling to teaching' as the reason; it noted the few response on parental direction, attractiveness of a secure job and lack of other choices.

The core element of the Report concerns the general perception of teachers and the teaching profession, and the challenges faced by teachers in practice. The Report, however, devotes only a short paragraph on 'quality of teacher education', stating that most student teachers had issues with 'low entry requirements' and 'an over-theoretical approach with too few practical components and a need for a stronger practicum experience'; these concerns were also supported by a 'number of teachers' (p. 14).

In terms of the challenges faced by teachers, the following were reported:

1. At the *Ministry of Education* level, the most prominent challenge was the rapid pace of educational reform, repeated shifts relating to policy, curriculum and assessment, and associated changes in regulations and procedures, together with overwhelming and uncoordinated curriculum changes being rolled out, most of which were without teacher consultations. These caused 'significant teacher stress and frustration', and confusion (p. 14).

Review Essay:

Quality Teachers and Teacher Education in Fiji *Identities, Challenges & Priorities. Final Report 2016*

The University of the South Pacific, The University of Bristol
and The University of Nottingham

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Introduction

At the heart of the educational agenda in the Pacific Islands lie the two salient issues of teacher education and preparedness. These two issues form the premise for myriad discussions in the Pacific for some time now. In Fiji in particular, focus on 'quality' in teacher education and preparedness began with the 1969 Education Commission, and continues to date. In 2015, a team of academics from the University of the South Pacific, the University of Bristol and the University of Nottingham¹ conducted a study of 'teachers, students teachers and teacher educators' in order 'to compile a snapshot of stakeholder understandings of issues related to teacher becoming, being and belonging in Fiji and their implications for the drive to improve teaching and learning quality' (p 4). This short paper is a review of the team's report (cited here as 'Report').

¹ The Team comprised Professor Konai Helu Thaman, Professor in Teacher Education, USP; Dr Cresantia Frances Koya Vaka'uta, Senior Lecturer in Education, USP; Dr Ledua Waqailiti, Lecturer in Education, USP; Dr Rosiana Lagi, Lecturer in Education, USP, Labasa Campus; Mr Asish Kumar, Secondary School Teacher & USP Tutor in Education, Labasa Campus; Mr Satish Chand, Lecturer in Education, Fiji National University, Lautoka Campus; Mrs Atelini Bai, Lecturer in Education, University of Fiji, Lautoka Campus; Professor Michael Crossley, Professor of Comparative and International Education, University of Bristol, and Professor Simon McGrath, Professor International Education and Development, University of Nottingham.

2. At the *School* level the major challenges concerned working in rural and remote locations, and lack of resources and facilities, poor quality textbooks, limited access to technology and low level of support from school administrations and school boards.

3. At the *Teacher* level, the major challenges were heavy workloads related to student-teacher ratios, composite classes, increased paperwork and extra curricula responsibilities; teacher stress due to closer monitoring by the Ministry, reduced starting salaries for pre-service teachers and limited promotion opportunities. In addition, challenges were generated by 'teacher responsibility for examination results, and the potential blame associated with poor student performance'. Competency and capability challenges 'identified by all stakeholders relate to their lack of content knowledge, ICT skills, appropriate training to deal with English as a Second Language and students with special and diverse learning needs' (p. 15). The Report notes that 'there were significant concerns raised about the quality and relevance of teacher education'.

4. At the *Curriculum* level, primary education was 'widely perceived to be reverting to a content driven curriculum emphasising examination outcomes and challenging the more holistic philosophy valued by the profession'. Another issue was the quality of the new curriculum; teachers argued that 'some of the new text-books were of inferior quality and contained many errors', and some content in the curriculum was placed at 'very high levels beyond students' prior learning and knowledge' (p. 16).

5. At the *Student* level, the major challenges arose 'from diverse student learning needs and differential ability, student attendance, poor attitudes towards learning and behaviour in addition to weak performance in tests and examinations' (p. 16). Teachers revealed 'a fear about the importance of student assessment for the career prospects of teachers, the idea that students may use this as leverage to get their own way, and a general concern that teachers wishing to make a difference may become frustrated resulting in the loss of higher quality teachers and a subsequent decline in quality of teaching and learning' (p. 16).

6. At the *Community* level, the major challenges related to 'cultural and language barriers and a lack of parental support', particularly the lack of respect for teachers in society and a lack of appreciation of teachers as professionals (p. 16).

On the basis of the above, the Report lists 15 priorities, which are divided into 3 categories.

The first category - those 'already attracting priority attention in recent policy initiatives and the three pillars of the October 2015 MoE

statement' - are (numbering from the Report are retained):

5. Strengthened levels of support for rural and isolated schools.
6. Improved access to and provision of school leadership training.
8. Improved opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) especially relating to counselling skills, ICT competencies, subject content knowledge, and training for English as a Second Language and students with special and diverse learning needs.
13. The improvement of student attitudes towards learning, behaviour and performance in tests and examinations.
14. Ongoing adaptation of the curriculum to better fit the needs of the labour market and cultural appropriateness.
15. The revision of the teacher education curriculum to strengthen teacher competencies, assessment and leadership skills, improve the practicum experience and increase engagement with the contextual realities of classroom teaching and learning.

The second category - on which concerted and sustained attention is needed to improve and sustain quality of teaching and learning in practice - include:

1. Strengthened consultation and collaboration between the MOE, teacher education providers and the teaching profession.
3. Clarification of the place of the NCF in ongoing reform.
7. A more realistic appreciation of teacher workloads.
9. Commitment to improve societal recognition and respect for the teaching profession and the role of the teacher.
10. Detailed consideration of time constraints relating to the coverage of curriculum content within the school year.
12. Systematic evaluation of the quality of new text books and the sequencing of content within the new curriculum.

The third category - which are 'new in their current form and deserve particularly careful and urgent attention at the policy level' - are:

2. More realistically paced, consistent and coordinated reform processes.
4. Critical reflection on the implications of intensification of examination pressures for the national philosophy of education, for pedagogy, the nature and quality of teaching and learning, the teaching profession and teacher education.
11. The resolution of tensions between an emergent content and examinations driven curriculum and the benefits of active learning and learner centred pedagogy.

The Report also makes further statements:

- there appears to be a need for a new statement of teacher standards and rights.

- A number of teachers appear to be unfamiliar with the Fiji Teacher Code of Ethics.
- There is a need to have a wider discussion addressing teacher standards and rights, with the MOE taking the initiative, with strong partnership with teachers and their unions, the Fiji Teachers' Registration Board (FTRB), teacher education providers and the Fiji Higher Education Commission.
- The new and more comprehensive standards will need to be taken into account in curricula and assessment in initial teacher education by teacher training institutions and be reflected in continuing professional development activities.
- The development of new standards needs universities as partners, alongside the Fiji Higher Education Commission.
- Teacher trainers need to engage more purposefully with the Fiji Teacher Registration Board to ensure that their graduates meet the requirements the Board has for a Fijian teacher.
- Careful consideration should be given on how a move towards common Fijian teacher standards and a core set of initial teacher education competencies.
- Many teachers lack sufficient understanding of the MoE's emerging new philosophy for Fijian education.
- A follow up to both the 2000 Education Commission and the 2005 Education Summit is desirable.
- A new Education Act is necessary.

Evaluation

While the Report contains a number of statements, assertions and recommendations, most of which may sound reasonable and may appear to be probable, it displays a serious lack of articulation between the statements, assertions, recommendations on the one hand, and research.

An obvious strength of the Report is the use of mixed method, largely qualitative with a mix of both Pacific and Western techniques to gather information. *Talanoa* (dialogic participant-researcher conversations) and *Talanga* (focus group sessions) form the premise of discussions for the research, prioritizing dialogic storying. While the method is applicable to the Fijian classroom setting and milieu, limited teacher participation of only six at each location and three teacher educators at each participating university, limited the scope of the research.

The Report is based on the views of 'stakeholders'. Yet, the education stakeholders included is restricted to teachers, trainee teachers,

teacher educators, and teacher unions. Four other critical stakeholders are neither included, nor reasons given for their exclusion; these are students, school operators, education sector regulators, and employers.

The focus is primarily on the teacher. The teacher seems to be the single entity responsible for quality holistic development of the child for lifelong learning. The teacher is viewed to be the single factor responsible for the child's optimum results. Undeniably, the learning and teaching process is a two-way process, whereby the most important stakeholders are the students and facilitators. Now that the Ministry of Education has designed in place a new strategy in appraising and assessing teachers, which includes student assessment of a teacher as well, it makes it necessary to involve students in any research related to the education process. The learners by far are the central participant in evidence-based learning and teaching processes. Likewise, in determining an ideal teacher, students' views are a missing link. It is essential to ponder upon ways one can measure an ideal teacher.

The Ministry of Education forms the basis of the learning and teaching process by enforcing policies, curriculum, ethics and principles; these are implemented at the ground level by the facilitators and students, thus, they become vital members of the process. In order to improve the quality of the learning and teaching process, these two essential stakeholders must be taken into consideration.

Over 95% of all schools in Fiji were established by and are now operated by community organisations. They form an important education sector stakeholder, but were not included in the research.

Ultimately, a vast majority of students from the school system end up working for someone else. Employers, therefore, form another stakeholder leg for Education but were not included in the research.

The Report, thus, can not be a complete stakeholder perspective on the nature and quality of teaching in Fijian schools.

Second, the Report is based on views of a 'sample' of some stakeholders:

- 15 primary school teachers,
- 15 secondary school teachers,
- 15 primary teacher trainees,
- 15 secondary teacher trainees,
- 15 teacher educators, and
- unspecified number of teacher union participants.

The estimated population of teachers is 12,000. Thirty teachers comprise a quarter of a percent of the population. This by all standards is

an unacceptable sample. In addition, the teachers selected were from 3 divisions only, and that too from Suva (Central), Nadi (Western) and Labasa (Northern). This further limits the findings as schools outside these areas have specific environments, particularly those in maritime zones and in interior of the main islands. Non-participation of these teachers in a research of national interest limits the findings, potentially making it a nebulous one. With the research aimed at investigating the quality of teachers and teacher education in Fiji, having to limit the respondents would skew the results. The focus on the key ingredients of discussion being quality teachers and teacher education necessitates a wider consultation and sample.

Third, the Report makes no mention of the sampling method for any of the 3 category of stakeholders. If standard scientific sampling methods were used, there would have been reference to this in the Report.

It is possible that a full stakeholder survey, using scientific sampling methods, may very well result in same lists defining ideal teachers, challenges, and priorities. But these are general lists of perceptions.

A comprehensive study would have given full evidential support to a lot of assertions made, each of which require detailed study on their own. The Report provides no evidential support for the assertions made on the following:

- rapid pace of educational reform, repeated shifts relating to policy, curriculum and assessment, and associated changes in regulations and procedures;
- overwhelming and uncoordinated curriculum changes being rolled out, most of which were without teacher consultations;
- significant teacher stress and frustration, and confusion;
- lack of resources and facilities;
- poor quality textbooks;
- limited access to technology;
- low level of support from school administration and school boards;
- heavy workloads related to student-teacher ratios, composite classes, increased paperwork and extra curricula responsibilities;
- teacher stress due to closer monitoring by the Ministry;
- teacher stress due to reduced pre-service teacher starting salaries;
- limited promotion opportunities;
- blame associated with poor student performance;
- lack of content knowledge;
- lack of ICT skills;
- lack of appropriate training to deal with English as a Second Language and students with special and diverse learning needs;

- concerns on the quality and relevance of teacher education;
- inferior quality of new text-books, and containing 'many errors';
- curriculum components which are at 'very high levels beyond students' prior learning and knowledge';
- differential abilities of students;
- student attendance;
- student attitudes towards learning;
- teacher career prospects;
- lack of parental support;
- lack of respect for teachers in society and a lack of appreciation of teachers as professionals;
- lack of familiarity with Fiji Teacher Code of Ethics; and
- lack of teacher standards and rights.

The views of a few teachers, trainee teachers and teacher educators would only produce assertions, not facts and firm foundations for policy amendments and change. Educational research needs to be taken seriously, with same standards and rigour as on which credible scientific research stands.

Conclusion

The debate on the learning and teaching process has been an ongoing one. It is not expected to come to an end anytime soon. The research leading to this Report has laudable objectives. Education is one of the most important ingredients of development of a people and nation. Investment in education is critical investments which Fiji has been making. As such research on whether the investment is producing the desired outcomes is welcomed. While the Report is a welcomed addition to literature on education in Fiji, it fails to provide a solid foundation for the commencement of evidence based discourse on quality teachers and teacher education in Fiji, let alone to provide definitive closures to these.

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