Chapter 12

AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN FIJI: PERCEPTIONS OF SOME STAKEHOLDERS

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INTRODUCTION

Fiji has seen significant progress in the education sector since gaining independence in 1970. However, as highlighted by Bacchus (2000) and Sharma (2000), major problems include quality of access to educational opportunities for all children and high dropout rates. A Save the Children Fiji study (1998) and the Ministry of Education's annual report for 2000 (2003) also acknowledge this issue. Although the percentage of young children who do not attend school had dropped significantly in the late 1990s, the Save the Children Fiji survey revealed that the number of children aged 6 to 14 years who do not go to school was more than 6000 (Save the Children Fiji, 1998). Nonetheless, this is an educational problem not unique to Fiji. Bacchus, referring to providing equal educational opportunities and attaining equality of outcomes, mentions that this is a worldwide phenomenon, which has no easy solutions (2000). Sharma (2000) states bluntly that most schools in Fiji do not provide alternative educational opportunities for those who do not get the few white collar jobs available. In the context of this issue, 155 governments, including Fiji, at the world conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, supported the idea of providing basic education for all (UNESCO, 2000). In 2000, Asia and Pacific member states of the United Nations organisations met again and developed a regional framework for action, setting specific goals and targets to be achieved by 2015. Goal number 2 recommends that a "strong and serious commitment must be made to include the excluded" (UNESCO, 2000, p.58). The Jomtien conference agreed that varied and innovative approaches should be promoted by governments and NGOs to meet the diverse educational needs, especially for the disadvantaged children.

Against this background, the present study intends to highlight one such educational initiative in Fiji and to identify its usefulness from the perspective of those who are directly involved in the children's education. This initiative offers an alternative form of education for some primary and/or secondary school students who have failed to graduate from their respective (age and academic) grades. In other words, these students are, to all intents and purposes, regarded as Failures Writ Large, school dropouts. Thus the initiative is similar to what Hamadache (1991) termed 'second chance' programs, enabling those dropouts to 'fill in the gaps' in their primary education. However, two broader terms – 'alternative education' and 'school dropouts' – have been used in the title, purposefully to describe the school under study and its students respectively. According to Reglin (1998), "Alternative education is defined as another form of education with variations of services and offerings available to specific groups of students whose needs are not being met in traditional classes" (p.18). This is the direction that the institute under study is advocating.

Rationale

The study of alternative educational opportunities for school dropouts is a vital first step to promoting equal access to basic education in Fiji. Students have to be provided with alternative educational options and choices to suit their needs and also meet their future visions and aspirations. However, while alternative education can be considered to be invaluable, it must be purposefully guided by relevant government policies that are contextualised to meet local needs in Fiji. Alternative education options are most likely to bring with them many social, economic and educational benefits. Hence, the expansion of primary and/or secondary education to cater for learners in an alternative educational context is considered paramount, particularly for developing countries such as Fiji. This view is supported by Figueredo and Anzalone (2003) in the following way:

> The costs of expanding conventional [primary and/or] secondary education is prohibitive for many developing countries, and relying on lower-cost alternative systems will not only be attractive but also inevitable. The discussion above shows a considerable range of

experience that countries can draw upon to design models that suit their national needs and conditions. There is evidence that alternative systems can provide good educational returns for investment. The experiences of countries like Mexico, Brazil, South Korea, and Indonesia demonstrate that alternative models can eventually reach large audiences and become an important aspect of a national program to expand opportunities for [primary and/or] secondary education. But this has not been the case universally in developing countries. (p.27)

Therefore, the consideration and inclusion of alternative educational opportunities for students in Fiji points in a positive direction. It could not only provide alternative and diverse choices for students in primary and/or secondary schools but also foster easy access and better retention rates for the general education system in Fiji as a whole.

Research in Fiji Education System

The school under study, referred to as 'the institute', is situated in Suva, Fiji and began operation in January 2000. It was officially set up for class 8 school leavers whose low academic results gained them no higher school placement. It is important to note that the institute's uniqueness of purpose, curriculum content, teaching methods used and diversity of student population mark it out from regular vocational schools. Although the term 'vocational' is used for the official purpose of registration, for the purpose of this study it is classified as an 'alternative school'. The school has fourteen full-time teachers who are all civil servants. The student number at the time of this study was 76, of whom more than 70 per cent were males. The majority of these students had dropped out of primary schools and a few came from special schools and secondary schools. The age of the students ranged from 11 to 21 years. The curriculum of the institute places emphasis on basic life skills such as effective communication, calculation, reading and writing. Apart from these, strong attention is paid to affective areas of human development, including self-respect, respect for others and self-discipline. The institute's curriculum also emphasises writing therapy, brain massages, short meditations and learning of useful life skills such as arts and crafts, sewing and cooking. The

teaching and learning day begins with signing in, followed by religious education, meditation, reading, communication and calculation skills. More emphasis is placed on activities, rather than subject content of the curriculum. Teaching groups are kept small, especially for literacy and numeracy classes. Teachers' spending more time with the students during the teaching and learning process is strongly encouraged. Punishments, formal tests and examinations are not encouraged at the school. Nevertheless, students' learning is assessed through non-formal internal assessments carried out in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy skills.

Alternative Education Opportunities

The conventional education is appropriate for the majority of students who stay on in school, but for those who do not do well and drop out in the early years, alternative educational opportunities should be offered (Reglin, 1998). Such alternative educational programs should help meet the basic learning needs of children who have not completed their primary and/or secondary education for various reasons. Alternative schools differ from conventional schools in two ways. First, alternative schools are designed to respond to the learning needs of a group of students who are not served by the conventional education programs. Secondly, students in alternative schools represent varying degrees of departure from standard school organisation, programs and environments. In varying degrees of departure from the regular, these schools are small, with small numbers and low teacher–pupil ratios, resulting in more personal contact and attention in teaching and learning (Reglin, 1998). Moreover, Martin (2000) mentions that alternative schools are flexible and warm learning communities which are rooted within socio-cultural philosophical foundations and diversity. Alternative schools do not subscribe to the 'one model fits all' education model and place more emphasis on how things are learned through an acceptance of student diversity (Tangen & Bland, 2012). However, such alternative educational opportunities are not common in Fiji, especially in the formal education sector. Moreover, Martin (2000) characterises alternative schools as flexible and warm learning communities; well rooted within socio-cultural philosophical foundations. They are diverse and do not subscribe to the 'one model fits all' education model; and through

the acceptance of student diversity, place more emphasis on how things are learned and less on what is learned (Tangen & Bland, 2012). However, such alternative educational opportunities are not common in Fiji, especially in the formal education sector. Bamford (1986) and Delailomaloma (1996) describe initiatives taken in Fiji in the non-formal sector as a positive direction. The current institutes in Fiji include: Navuso Student Farmer Scheme, Young Farmer's Course –Tutu and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Mobile Vocational Training Programme (Bamford, 1986) and Rural Youth Programmes (Delailomaloma, 1996).

In the formal education sector, however, reacting to the recommendation of the then current 1969 Fiji Education Commission report, vocational initiatives, known as multi-craft programmes, were introduced for form 4 (Year 10) dropouts in the mid-1970s. This initiative, now called Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), is regarded as a 'second-class option' in Fiji (Sharma, 2000). However, the TVET initiative "failed to achieve its objectives against strong parental pressure for academic course" (Sharma (2000, p.3). There are less similar alternative schools, which may target primary and/or secondary school dropouts in Fiji. However, different forms of alternative educational programmes targeting young school leavers have been in existence in other countries such as the United States of America (Reglin, 1998; Martin, 2000), Pakistan (Kazi, 2000), Sri Lanka (Diyasea, 1976) and in Thailand (Piromruen & Keoyote, 2001). Reglin (1998) mentions that since the alternative education schools are personal and focused, students feel valued, accepted and part of the school culture and community. He comments that:

> Small school size allowed principals and teachers to reach students who were formally hard to reach in school, as well as encouraged communication and a sense of belonging and limited bureaucratic obstacles. (p.19)

Kazi (2000) in her evaluation of social action program in Pakistan discussed four alternative schools, one of them the Non-formal Education/ Community supported schools. These schools do not benefit from government buildings, but are part of the house owned by the teacher, family or other community members. After studying these schools, UNICEF concluded that the schools

succeeded in reaching and enabling the provision of primary-level education for disadvantaged individuals and groups (Kazi, 2000). This suggests that not only has inadequate research been done about alternative schools in Fiji, but also there seem to be virtually few alternative educational programmes in existence for such students, regardless of how great their need. Nevertheless, it can be argued that more alternative educational options should be provided as this can be used effectively to help solve educational problems such as dropouts in Fiji, or at least make a reasonable effort to meet their needs.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to 'get a feel', through the perceptions of students, teachers and parents, for the usefulness of an alternative educational initiative aimed at school dropouts. Hence, the use of case study research methodology was considered appropriate since the hope was to identify the lived experiences of the research participants (Creswell, 2005; Bouma & Ling, 2004; Yin, 1994). Case study has been defined as an in-depth investigation of "a program, an event, an activity, a process, of one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2002, p. 15). Taking into consideration the nature of the research aim, this study used a qualitative case study approach, employing interviews and talanoa sessions, to gauge the human experiences and understandings of the different stakeholders (Yin, 1994). The recognition of indigenous epistemology in the form of 'talanoa' sessions was intended to gather a wider range of information. Violeti (2006) defines 'talanoa' in the following way:

> Superficially, talanoa can be referred to as a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal. It is almost always carried out face-to-face. Tala means to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply. Noa means of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary or void. (p. 23)

The combined use of interview method in conjunction with talanoa sessions has helped to gather invaluable data as expressed by the research participants.

Participants

The study involved twenty-eight participants (n = 28). Fifteen from the total of 76 students at the institute were interviewed, including students from all four class levels. Only six of them, however, were female: female students are fewer in number and they are unevenly distributed across the class levels so it was not possible to select equal numbers of girls from each level. Students with special needs such as physical disabilities and learning difficulties were also included in the study, to make the sample representative of the population, but an important criterion for the selection of students was their ability to communicate effectively. In addition, eight parents were interviewed, of whom four were parents of male students. Selection was limited to parents who were easily accessible. Only five teachers (two male and three female) out of a total of 14 were involved in the study. Some of them had been teaching for a few years and the others had just joined the institute recently.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

As already noted, the case study used unstructured interviews guided by pre-determined questions, and talanoa sessions. Yin (1994) identified the interview method of data collection as one of the most important sources of case study information. Before the interviews, the purpose of the study was explained to the respondents and their informed consent sought (Smith, 1980). For both interview and talanoa sessions, the discussions and some important issues raised were noted as field notes. After the interview and talanoa sessions, each respondent was given ample time to check the information that had been written. The first author conducted all the interviews and talanoa sessions personally. Most of the interviews with parents were conducted during the parents' day; for others, the first author visited the parents' homes personally after arranging a suitable free time with them. The interviews and talanoa sessions, especially with teachers and parents, were lengthy and lasted for more than twenty minutes. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected by using pseudonyms such as MS [male student] 1, FT [female teacher] 2, P/M [parent of male] 1, and so on to represent the participants' identities and their voices. Data regarding the institute were collected through talanoa sessions with the different stakeholders. All data

were analysed using the thematic approach (Creswell, 2005, 2002; Merriam, 1988).

Results of the Study

In line with the qualitative nature of the research approach and aim of the study, the most important thematic findings are discussed under three major categories: students' perceptions, teachers' perceptions and parents' perceptions. These findings are presented below, supported by data collected from the interviews and talanoa sessions.

Students' perceptions

All the students who took part in the study generally agreed that the institute was helping them in many ways. The first reason provided was that the institute gave them a second chance to attend school. Improvements in their academic skills, mainly reading and writing, were acknowledged by all the respondents. Most of the students were pleased to have joined the institute. One student stated, 'When I came to Fiji, I couldn't read or write that well in English. Now I can' (MS 5). Another student responded: 'I didn't want to go to a normal school. I tried some 5 or 6 schools in Suva but could not find a place. The reply I got was that I was over-age. If this school was not in place, I would be at home now' (MS 7).

Together with learning basic academic skills, students felt happy about being given a chance to learn practical life skills such as woodwork, agriculture, sewing and computer. Another student puts it this way: 'I got my first opportunity to operate a computer here' (MS 2). Apart from learning the academic and practical subjects, students generally noticed positive changes in their social life as well. This was shown by having more friends, more supportive teachers, improved school attendance and behaviour, a sense of belonging to the institute, better communication skills; these are positive qualities they lacked before. In support of the changes they experienced, three students had this say:

I was a shy person before, but now I have changed. (FS 3)

I am happy to come to school. (FS 1)

In whatever difficulties we face, the teachers are always there for us. (FS 5)

Furthermore, all the students interviewed discussed their visions and aspirations for the future. All the students agreed that the institute helped them to go back into the conventional primary, secondary or vocational schools. According to one of the students, this would be her last year at the institute. She said with some satisfaction: 'I am planning to go to a normal secondary school next year and this will help me in my aims' (FS 2).

The students also identified some factors or problems that were a hindrance to the success of the institute. Some failed to uphold the good behaviour and manners learned, and adopted some negative behaviour patterns instead. One student had the following to say: 'Due to the smaller number of the students in my class, I do not have choice in making many friends but sometimes I follow what they tell me to do' (MS 9). Overall, though, as a result of the 'second chance' given, positive developments have been evident in the study. The main areas of the students' development have been in academic, practical life skills, social life and relationships. The students feel more comfortable about attending the school and achieving their visions and aspirations for their own future. This includes going either to the conventional primary, secondary and vocational schools or finding suitable employment. Apart from the general usefulness of the institute, however, some worrisome findings were also apparent, relating mostly to the problems that hindered the success of the institute, including the emergence of some unsuitable behaviour patterns among the students.

Teachers' perceptions

The teacher participants agreed that the institute was beneficial in terms of providing a second chance to early school dropouts so that they could develop physically, academically, socially, mentally and spiritually. One of the teachers thus explained:

The school was helping the students to improve their skills in reading, farming, carpentry and joinery, tailoring, sewing and basic engineering. Some of these students are slow in academic classes but do well in outdoor work. These students can achieve what they want to be if they are serious with what the school was offering them. (MT 2)

Another teacher believed that not only did the institute provide formal educational training but students could become better persons as well. As she expressed it:

There is an overlap between formal and informal educational, touching on life skills which prepares the whole person rather than only the academic person. (FT 1)

Another teacher, who has spent a few years at the institute, said that students benefited in terms of going for further studies and even employment. Hence, he stated that:

Some of our students from the past years have managed to enter form 3 in mainstream secondary schools. Some have gone to vocational schools while some have found jobs. (MT 1)

The teachers feel that several factors contribute a lot toward the success of the students. From the teachers' point of view, the flexibility of the curriculum and assessment methods allows them to serve each student's learning needs at his or her pace. Another contributing factor is the smaller number of students in each class.

Nevertheless, the teachers are aware of some problems that need to be resolved in order to make the institute more effective. Lack of materials and resources, especially, for the practical subjects is one of the main factors affecting the normal delivery of lessons. Some teachers also feel that there is a need for more teachers, especially for ones with professional qualifications in dealing with students with special needs and student counselling opportunities. One teacher had this to say:

> We do things now only using our common sense. If we were qualified in dealing with students with specific learning difficulties, we would help these students properly. (FT 2)

The curriculum was another factor which, if improved, would greatly enhance the success of the institute. One teacher said that there was no prescribed curriculum for the teachers to use for teaching. Nonetheless, the teacher went on to describe the current curriculum as being flexible, teacher friendly and learner-centred. That meant teachers were given freedom and choice to choose the curriculum content they thought was relevant for the students. Questioning the curriculum flexibility, the same teacher had this to say:

> We need a certain level of maturity plus professionalism of teachers to deal with a flexible curriculum. If teachers are not at that level of maturity, honesty, dedication, then flexibility can be a hindrance. (FT 1)

Parents' perceptions

The parents interviewed expressed similar views about the success of the institute. Some parents agreed that the reading, writing and communication skills of their children had improved. Parents also saw and experienced the changes in the behaviour patterns of their children. One of the parents described her daughter's behaviour in the following way:

> She has now gained confidence, is positively outgoing and wants to go out and try new things. She is very excited about doing practical subjects such as computer and planting. (P/F 1)

Another parent summed up his daughter's behaviour towards learning by saying:

> She is willing to learn and is positive. She is determined. She wants to come to school. Her conversation is centred on her school and friends. (P/F 2)

At the same time, though, many parents were not aware of the curriculum content the school was offering. This is because they were not exposed to the

school curriculum through parent information sessions. However, they were satisfied with the overall performance and functioning of the institute. One parent commented that:

> I sent my child to a special vocational school in Suva but there he was doing only vocational work like gardening. I wanted my child to learn extra things so that's why I brought my child to this school as I saw it doing a good job in terms of teaching and learning. (P/M 2)

Another parent had this to say:

> I have been assessing my child since primary school. I know he is not fit for office work. That's why I sent him to this school so that he can work on practical subjects. (P/M 1)

A strong feeling of satisfaction was expressed by one enthusiastic parent:

> In her 8 years of primary education, I have always had a negative report about my daughter during the parents' day. This is the first parents' day on which I am hearing something good about my daughter and this makes me happy. (P/F 1)

Another parent thought of the institute's relevance and usefulness in terms of providing alternative educational opportunity as being affordable. Hence, he mentioned that 'In terms of finance, it is not very expensive. There are less fundraising activities too' (P/M 1).

The parents also identified certain factors that hindered the success of the institute. One parent of a female student was disappointed because of the small number of girls in the school and particularly in her daughter's class. Hence, the parent expressed the view that:

> My daughter has picked up several behavioural patterns not suitable for her age group. She is following others, especially the older girls in school. (P/F 1)

Moreover, the interviews and talanoa sessions revealed that many parents were not aware of the curriculum, assessment and teaching methods and

other activities used at the institute. This poor communication between institute and homes has placed the parents in limbo in terms of understanding the teaching and learning approaches used in the school and how they could support their children succeed in school.

Discussion of Findings

The provision of alternative educational opportunities for disadvantaged students in Fiji has been considered as an important pathway to make educational opportunities available to all citizens. Due to the high dropout and school truancy rates in Fiji schools, the Ministry of Education has urged the need for concerted efforts through education improvement programmes (Connor, 2013). This would not only provide alternative educational opportunities for the dropouts but will also make good-quality education accessible to the majority of the populace. The current study has formed the view that alternative education in Fiji has taken a positive direction. It has identified several major themes that emerge across students', teachers' and parents' perceptions. The three different stakeholders play pivotal roles in the provision of educational opportunities for children in Fiji.

Students' perceptions

The study made it clear that most students expressed satisfaction in the success of the educational institute in which they were doing their studies. For the most part students expressed the sense that the school has given them a 'second chance' to further their studies, which would be useful for their future. This is supported by the views of one student who expressed it as: 'I am very fortunate to come to this school as I thought I did not have hope in education but now this is my second chance to succeed and be independent in my life' (MS 7). According to Connor (2013), alternative education in Fiji has taken what he calls a 'place-based educational pathway'. This approach places the learner in the context of the learning and cultural institution and focuses on the heritage, cultures, opportunities, experiences, attitudes and skills based on useful skills for future use. Most students in the study therefore felt that the institution was equipping them with the knowledge and skills they would otherwise have missed out, if the second chance opportunity had

not been given. A study conducted in the USA also claimed that when high school dropouts are given a chance to pursue education for the second time, "each and every student becomes a realistic participant in life as envisioned for later years as an adult" (Cassel, 2012, p. 33). This shows the usefulness of the institute as individuals are able to feel and express their satisfaction in the success of the institute in Fiji. One student, for example, supported that; 'Before I came to institute, I couldn't read or write well in English but now I can' (male, 5). However, if the student had not been given the 'second chance', he would not have had this educational opportunity for life.

Their responses indicate that the students feel they have gained useful academic and basic life skills through their studies at the institute. They are happy that the skills they have learned would be useful in their academic life and the workplace as well as in their future. Whilst academic skills were learned, the life skills such as woodwork, agriculture, sewing and computing helped to add value their studies. One student supported this view by saying: 'It is true that academic skills are important but the skills in sawing, woodwork and computing make me feel competent to face the real world' (FS 4). It is also apparent that students feel confident after attaining life skills with the support of their lecturers and tutors. However, whilst basic useful skills were acquired at the institute, students also expressed the need to have more friends, supportive staff members and improved communication skills. This would increase the student interest and enrolment at the institute (Ziderman, 2009). Students also demonstrated awareness of the need for the development of useful skills through skills-based course offerings at the institute. In other words, they are well aware of the potential of skills-based courses as these are useful for their future lives.

The students articulated a feeling that the institute has helped them to develop better character, vision and aspirations for their future. Their level of confidence about doing well in their studies and progressing to higher education or into the job market has also risen, in their estimation. They consider the school curriculum to be relevant to their future aspirations and learning needs. From an inclusive classroom perspective, Carrington and Macarthur (2012) point out that inclusive curriculum and learning outcomes

must consider every student's learning needs and aspirations in any given context. This is vital when considering the type of curriculum that is used in the institute under study. One student therefore stated the following: 'The things that we are learning in the school are good because we can now know that we have bight future ahead of us' (MS 6). However, some students also pointed out that while the school offers them skills needed for their future, some negative behaviour patterns have also emerged in the school. Hence, they have recommended the school administration to take immediate corrective measures. As well as teaching useful skills for the benefit of the students, the institute must also promote the social relationship aspects of human development across the range of life-span issues such as students' self-identify, attachment, behaviour and social relationships.

Teachers' perceptions

The teachers at the institute under study have played an important role in terms of disseminating relevant information in accordance with what the institute aspires to achieve. The results indicate that most of the teachers who took part in the study were positive about the institute and the purpose with which it was established, and that is to work with students who had dropped out of the conventional education system. One teacher thus commented: 'Our institute is doing well because students who were once out of school have the chance of coming back to school and learn new skills and ideas' (MT 5). Other teachers shared the view that the school was serving its mission by way of providing second-chance good-quality educational opportunities for all its children. This view is supported by the UN development goal number two, which talks about achieving universal basic education for all children in all countries in the world, including Fiji (UNESCO, 2000). However, a subsequent UN report states that; "Despite impressive strides forward at the start of the decade, progress in reducing the number of children out of school has slackened considerably" (United Nations, 2014, p. 16). While Fiji has done far better in terms of achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) number two through students' educational access and retention, more students are still not receiving the quality education the government aspires to achieve (Malo, 2011). Therefore, many teachers in the current study thought

that more alternative schools should be established so that students who left school for various reasons like school fee problems, distance from home to school and parental negligence, among other reasons, can be absorbed into the alternative educational programmes.

The study confirmed that all the teachers found the school curriculum and assessment practices to be flexible. Teachers individually or collectively decide on the curriculum content, on the basis of the particular student's learning needs, and assess them accordingly on an individual basis. This is important because virtually all the students come with their own learning needs and also some may have been away from school for a long time. Whilst commenting on curriculum flexibility, Baughan (2003) stated the following:

> Curriculum flexibility is intended to bring benefits to the individual pupil and education as a whole through creative and innovative approaches. From an individual young person's perspective this might mean having the opportunity to pursue a vocational interest that was not previously provided by the school or to make faster progress to a higher level of attainment in a given subject. This is in contrast to a 'one size fits all' approach to curriculum design. (p.10)

This approach gives the students flexibility for them to get acquainted with the school's culture and the things that are happening in the school context and work towards acquiring the necessary skills. Thus, one of the teachers commented that: 'When students do not catch up with the class work and the related activities, I either reteach the content or provide alternative ways of learning' (MT 3). This view is supported by Morton, Rietveld, Guerin McIlroy and Duke (2012): "When teachers see all students as learners, the curriculum is relevant to all students" (p. 271). It is considered important as this approach also takes into account the students' individual differences in learning. That means the school curriculum and assessment practices are implemented according to students' learning needs and the teachers ensure this happens in a sequential approach for students to understand the curriculum content. Students' learning is also assessed based on the individual learning needs and student diversity (Carrington et al., 2012). This is based on what has been taught in class or on a one-on-one basis. Baughan (2003) therefore stated that

overall, an institution's flexible curriculum:

> • *takes account of their own local circumstances*
>
> • *recognises the requirements of their students and communities*
>
> • *meets the needs and expectations of all learners*
>
> • *meets the demands of stakeholders and society in general*
>
> • *encourages increased achievement and commitment to learning.* *(p.7);[original emphasis].*

These statements clearly demonstrate that the kind of curriculum on offer at the institute in Fiji is more flexible, which gives students more flexibility and opportunities to pass the basic requirements at each grade level. Furthermore, the positive development in the area of flexible assessment practices also promotes student engagement and learning, which can be replicated in other similar institutions in Fiji.

Parents' perceptions

The parents regard the learning institution under study as an alternative education institution that caters for the needs of their children. Many parents who took part in the study suggested that the curriculum is relevant to meet the learning needs of the students, as it is more practically oriented. A parent whose son was in the final year expressed that: 'My son has been studying in this institution for some time now and I can see that he is learning skills which are really useful' (female, 2). Another parent had similar views: 'The students in this school are so lucky to be enrolled here because the school curriculum is really good to get into some practical jobs quickly' (male, 4). Hence, most of the parents commented that the school curriculum is relevant for their children's learning needs. Bickerstaff (2012) supports the claim that when the parents collaborate with school staff in the development and implementation of the curriculum they tend to take ownership and have a better idea what their children are learning at school. According to Saggers, Macartney and Guerin (2012), "Listening and collaboration based on respect

allows people to have and share their hopes and dreams, and therefore create a more inclusive present and future" (p.214). However, other parents also commented that dropping out is a problem in Fiji schools and everyone must take responsibility in keeping their children in schools. While the school curriculum on offer is considered to be relevant for the students, other parents also commented on the need to send the students to alternative schools. Almost all the parents interviewed in the study stated that instead of sending the children to attend alternative schools, many parents are involved in traditional obligations and church donations on which they spend funds that are supposed to be used for their children's education (Xinhua, 2006). Nonetheless, some parents were of the opinion that in most cases they are not informed about the school curriculum and the assessment practices used at the school. This shows an institutional failure to make parents aware of the school's teaching and learning policy and practice, in the interest of curriculum and assessment accountability and transparency.

Many parents in the study also spoke of there being many factors that contribute to students dropping out from Fiji's schools. While the government has been so supportive in terms of providing free education, curriculum support resources and bus fares, among other support services, some parents pointed out that still many children are not in school. According to Malo (2011), despite the issue being brought up in the village meetings, some parents interviewed have not been responsible about sending their children to school. More than half of the parents reported that finance is a big obstacle that has affected their ability to send their children to school, for reasons associated with poor backgrounds and/or transport issues for many remote locations. However, with the Fiji government's tuition free education policy and subsidised school bus transport being introduced, more students are likely to be in schools in 2014 and beyond, as long as the policy is sustained. Even so, as one parent commented: 'My child is lucky to be in this school as he is learning some useful carpentry skills but I am sorry for other kids who are still in the villages and could not make it to school' (male, 7). On the other hand, Prasad (2011) reported in one of the local dailies that reasons for students' early departure from school are often associated with high teenage pregnancy rates and peer pressure, two issues that have featured prominently as contributors to

the high dropout rates in Fiji. A study done in the UK also identified teenage pregnancy and alcohol abuse as factors that contribute to students leaving school early (Levacic & Marsh, 2007). One parent in the current study also had this to say: 'Many students are leaving school and do not think of alternative education due to peer pressure and other related issues' (male, 4). Hence, it is important to ensure that the full range of factors that contribute to student dropout rates in schools in Fiji be identified, so that redemptive actions can be taken sooner to remedy the situation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study intended to find out the perceptions of students, teachers and parents of the usefulness of an alternative education institute in Fiji. All the respondents expressed the pressing need for and usefulness of the institute as a provider of a 'second chance' to the school dropouts, one more hope for continuing their education and achieving their visions and aspirations. The respondents agreed that the institute is achieving its aim in providing basic academic education and practical life skills to the students. The evidence suggests positive development in the character and behaviour of the learners, as expressed by all three categories of respondents. Apart from commendations for the relevance and usefulness of the institute, some negative factors were revealed by this study. One such factor, according to the teachers, is the lack of clarity in the curriculum and assessment content. The absence of a suitable curriculum framework gives teachers the freedom to choose suitable curriculum content for their students but the way in which this flexibility has been introduced and prepared for has been questioned. This criticism reflects in part the limitations that have existed to date across the whole education system: a tendency to be exam driven, reliance on centrally dictated curricula and teacher-centred pedagogy, chalk and talk instruction, and limitations in the quality and quantity of teaching staff. Recent moves to turn this approach around have thus far made all too few inroads on general classroom practice. A further dimension of the problem for the studied institute is the shortage of staff specifically qualified to teach students with learning difficulties. This means that teachers currently teaching at the institute are not adequately qualified to support students with special

needs. Obviously, much work remains to be done in the area of alternative education in Fiji and in other Pacific Island countries. Nonetheless, Figueredo and Anzalone (2003) have made valuable proposals on the basis of lessons learned from the literature on the use of alternative models of education, some of which are particularly appropriate for Fiji:

- Alternative models can and have worked, depending on circumstances, but there is no guarantee that this will always be the case. Countries seeking to develop alternative models are advised to do so cautiously and in a way that is mindful of the challenges they face;

- Alternative models will be sustained over time only if they demonstrate to students, parents, and the nation that they offer quality education;

- The core curriculum of alternative models should be congruent to a large extent with that of conventional secondary schools;

- The effectiveness of different media depends more on the content and quality of instructional design than on the type of media employed; and

- The successful implementation of alternative models is highly dependent on national infrastructure. The management of these kinds of program requires specialised skills that professionals in conventional education systems often do not possess. In order to develop high-quality distance education programs, staff members must receive appropriate training, as required by their new assignments. The system should also strive to develop recognised career paths for its professionals in order to improve its prestige as an authentic system for delivery of education.

However, in the light of the current study, the following suggestions are made for further investigation. First, it is suggested that similar alternative educational initiatives, if in existence elsewhere in Fiji or other neighbouring countries, be identified and studied using a similar research approach. Undertaking such research would produce findings useful for education planners, administrators and teachers. Secondly, for the school under study, it is recommended that an in-depth study be undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of its operation in the first few years. Such a study should include

both current and former students, parents and teachers of the institute. Thirdly, this study has discussed a small alternative education initiative in Fiji. It is hoped, though, that the education policy makers, planners and the administrators of the institute under study will consider the suggestions made to be useful in their future planning endeavours.

Reflective Questions

1. What is the difference between the alternative education model and the conventional education system?

2. What are some of the reasons why there are so many dropouts from the education system in Fiji?

3. What is the importance of forging alternative education models in developing countries like Fiji as part of the education system?

4. What are some challenges faced by developing countries like Fiji in promoting alternative education models?

5. What kind of curriculum framework needs to be developed to meet the needs of alternative education models in developing countries?

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