

A Reality Check: Teaching Practices in Fijian Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This interpretive study of teaching practices explored the perceptions of teachers in a changing landscape in secondary schools in Fiji. Research participants engaged in focus group interviews in which they shared their teaching stories. The study found that the key issues for teachers were student-centered learning and continuous assessment. It also found that teachers were skilled and knowledgeable in pedagogy however some of their teaching practices are ineffective. It is contended that this situation is the result of inadequate support systems for teachers and in turn is perpetuating protracted change in the education system. Suggestions for teachers to develop adaptive and innovative skills that enable them to meet the changing role of teaching include a range of initiatives related to continuous professional development.

Key Words: *teaching practices, continuous professional development, quality teaching, quality teachers, student-centered learning, internal assessment, student outcomes*

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century education reform agenda pursues ‘quality education’ focusing on ‘quality teachers’ and ‘quality teaching’ in particular, the impact of teachers on learners. ‘Teacher quality’ is regarded as “encompassing both ‘quality teaching’ and ‘quality teachers’ and as such, includes teacher’s personal qualities, skills, knowledge and understanding of their classroom practices and importantly their impact on student outcomes” (Naylor & Sayed, 2014, p. 4). According to a review by the World Bank (2012) “a number of studies have found that teacher effectiveness is one of the most important school-based predictors of student learning (p.1).

Furthermore, effective teaching practices in the classroom that meet the varied needs of students and student outcomes are considered an important measure of teacher quality. Various international studies highlight the fact that effective schools are those that have good quality teachers (Naylor & Sayed, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2006; UNESCO, *Investing in TVET Teachers: a Priority Concern in the Asia-Pacific*, 2012).

In Fiji, a Pacific Island country, reforms dominate the 21st century education landscape as this region of the developing world attempts to accelerate socio-economic development. However, Fiji has a history of difficulties in progressing education reform which it is argued is the result of a colonial system which caused inequalities in the quality and provision of education throughout Fiji (Tavola, 1991). In addition, it is argued that the changing socio-economic and political contexts before and after independence and political upheavals since the late 1980s have contributed to the slow development of education in Fiji (Tavola, 1991; Narsey, 2012; Veramu, 2008; Nabobo-Baba, 2001). Thus, in spite of an abundance of research, reports and recommendations on many aspects of the Fijian education system there has been relatively minimal progress throughout its history from the colonial days (Tavola, 1991; Kumar, 2004). Accordingly, it is argued as the twenty-first century progresses the general population in Fiji continues to face issues of poverty stemming from deficiencies in the education system (Fiji Teachers Union, 2013; Narsey, 2012; Teasdale, 2005).

Notwithstanding, since the beginning of the 21st century, the Government of Fiji through the Ministry of Education has led significant change initiatives reflecting responsiveness to international recognition that teachers and teaching are at the forefront of effective education reform (UNESCO, 2012; Fiji Ministry of Education, 2006).

It is also contended that progress in Fiji has also been hindered by the absence of empirical studies which explore the ‘everyday’ lives of teachers rather than investigating specific predetermined matters. The study reported in this article aimed to address this deficit in the research literature and adopted a broad interpretive approach to investigating the phenomena of interest. Accordingly a broad aim of this study was formulated and expressed as “What are the perceptions of secondary teachers in Fiji on contemporary teaching practices?”

TEACHER QUALITY

There is an abundance of literature on the topic of teacher quality and teaching quality. Whilst some regard teacher quality as comprising the training and attributes of the teacher, others take a more holistic view. This latter view encompasses training and continuous professional development of the teacher, student outcomes, the working environment in which the teacher operates, learning resources and other support the teacher receives including school management and leadership, and teacher remuneration (Naylor & Sayed, 2014). The importance of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to promote quality teaching has been well acknowledged at a global level (Darling-Hamond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013). The research literature contends that effective CPD which instigates positive change in teaching practices must be ongoing, job-embedded and relevant to the individual teachers' needs.

Hattie (2009) reviewed over 800 meta-analyses of research into student learning and found that the impact of teacher's level of education on student outcomes is relatively negligible compared to other aspects of the quality of teaching, however, the strategies used and the quality of teacher-student relationships had much larger effects (Naylor & Sayed, 2014).

Whilst various studies concur that teacher quality affects student outcomes, they tend to differ in what they consider to be the important aspects of teacher quality that explain the difference in student outcomes. In an analysis by Naylor and Sayed (2014), it is purported that "part of the reason for the different views on what are considered to be the important aspects of teacher quality that explain the difference in student outcomes could be the methodologies or different contexts, or it could be that fundamentally what matters most are teacher classroom practices" (p.7). The study reported in this article has adopted the view that the effect of teachers on learning in particular their teaching practices, has a critical impact on student learning outcomes which in turn affect the capacity of a nation to progress economic and social reform.

THE STUDY CONTEXT

In Fiji, the key twenty-first century reforms impacting on teaching practices are associated with the new National Curriculum Framework (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2013). In particular, the introduction of an outcomes-based education system has shifted the curriculum from 'content prescriptions' to an 'outcomes syllabus'. This shift demands a change in pedagogy from teacher-directed learning to student-centred learning. In addition, a shift in the assessment system towards increased internal assessment has driven significant transformation of practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study reported in this article adopted a qualitative approach in data collection, analysis and presentation. Qualitative research is described as seeking "to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 48). In this process the notion of applying trustworthiness to constructed meaning is an important aspect of the evaluation. The approaches that were used to evaluate this study in terms of trustworthiness were consistent

with the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who suggest that different criteria are applicable for ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research from the positivist criteria of validity and reliability. In the study reported in this article the credibility of the data was enhanced by the fact that the three researchers represented the two different ethnic groups in Fiji and an expatriate Australian. These researchers were also experienced teachers in the Fiji education system and thus had a credible understanding of the culture and the context of the research environment. This enabled a trustworthy understanding of the meaning that the teachers were giving to the phenomenon being investigated. Furthermore in order to ensure the 'trustworthiness' of data it is also important to consider the capacity for the study's findings to be replicated. This requires the researcher to ensure the process of the research is logical, clearly documented and shows how the interpretations were reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A methodology synthesis of grounded theory was used to guide the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In accordance with the grounded theory approach to the analytical process, data gathering and analysis were undertaken simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data analysis involved reading through the information on the transcripts and identifying major themes, including shared opinions and areas of differences. In particular, general ideas or concepts were sought and used as the basis for making generalisations.

The quotes selected to include in this article were ones which provided specifics rather than generalisations. For example, to explain the teachers' views on how they used Student-Centered Learning the quote in this article provides an example of a specific scientific experiment. Although, there were many general comments on this aspect the comment used is considered to articulate the point more engagingly. Furthermore, percentages reported in the findings were simple calculations based on the number of teachers who made comments divided by the total population of teacher-participants.

Since the study involved collecting data from humans, ethics approval was obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee and the Fijian Ministry of Education.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Fiji's ethnic population comprises fifty-four percent native (iTaukei) Fijians, thirty-eight percent Indian, and small communities of European, other Pacific Islanders and overseas Chinese who are all Fiji citizens (Government of Fiji, 2007). The Fijian government promotes a unified education system with government schools providing education for all. This racial diversity adds both richness and challenges for teachers in Fijian secondary schools (Nabobo-Baba, 2001; Veramu, 2008).

The teachers selected for the interviews were purposefully chosen in order to obtain varied perspectives. In keeping with this notion the criteria used for selecting the teachers comprised gender, ethnicity, years of teaching experience, highest level of teaching qualification and teaching subject areas. Furthermore, schools from the urban, rural and remote areas of the main populated island of Viti Levu were selected. 102 teachers from 20 schools were interviewed in focus groups of between four and eight participants (See Table 1).

Table 1: Teacher Participants

Cross Categories	Gender		Ethnicity		Qualification			Yrs of Exp			Tot
	M	F	Fijian	Indian	PG	Degree	Dip/Cert	<5	<1 0	>1 0	
TVET	17	16	15	18	1	20	12	5	11	17	33
Maths/Science	12	18	10	20	2	25	3	2	7	21	30
Language/Arts	9	18	13	14	1	20	6	3	5	19	27
Commerce	7	5	2	10		12			4	8	12
Total	45	57	40	62	4	77	21	10	27	65	102

However, in the comparative analysis of the data there were no significant differences between the perceptions of teachers from different classifications other than the subject teaching area. Thus, the following research findings highlight significant differences in teacher perceptions based only on subject teaching area. Nonetheless, the absence and existence of different perceptions within the different categories has implications for future policy development and practice.

An analysis of the data gathered in the research project being reported in this article revealed that the perceptions of teachers in Fiji on contemporary teaching practices in Fiji embraced views on a wide range of topics. The comments by teachers were analysed, categorised and further analysed to develop the main themes. Initially six themes were identified and coded accordingly: (SB) student behaviour and corporal punishment; (IA) internal assessment, (E) the role of examinations, (PA) performance assessment of schools and teachers; (SL) student learning; (EI) compulsory education and external influences. There were also many ad hoc comments. These were considered outside the focus of this research study and accordingly disregarded in the analysis. Some examples of these miscellaneous statements are:

The wages for Principals is increasing whilst teacher's wages remain unchanged.

Our schools in Suva are a dumping yard for poor performing students.

We are always being told to become smart teachers and learn from the mistakes we made last year – what does this mean?

Statements that could be clearly categorised were subsequently further analysed to determine interconnecting themes. For example the following teacher comments were linked with more than one theme as noted below:

The behaviour of students has changed and is impacting on the learning in the classroom. Some teachers say they spend more time on behaviour management than

teaching (SB; SL).

As a Form 5 Science teacher I am experiencing problems with students learning because teachers in Forms 3 & 4 have rushed the students through their coverage and I don't blame them as the Classroom Based Assessments take up too much time (IA; SL; EI).

Most of our parents are uneducated and for them education is not a priority. When the students take work home it is often not done. (IA; EI; SL).

Government policy is that all students must go into Form 6. We are not allowed to get the students to repeat so we just pass them, even the ones who are poorly behaved and this compromises our honesty (SL; IA; SB).

DISCUSSION

Based on an interpretation of an abundance of data from the teacher interviews two main themes emerged which are presented as two sub-sections in this article, that is, findings focused on student-centered learning and those concerning participants' views and experiences of internal assessment.

STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Student-centered learning (SCL) embraces a range of teaching strategies such as group learning, experiential learning and inquiry learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kumar, 2004; Kolb, 1984). In 1984 David Kolb exposed the principal that a person's learning is enhanced through discovery and experience. This seminal work has provided a platform for the development of a holistic model of the learning process. Student-centered teaching practices recognise that through the process of sharing, experience and inquiry, students construct much of their understanding on subject matter concepts. This contrasts to the traditional approach of teacher-directed learning where student understanding is mainly constructed by teachers. All teacher participants in this study reported using some student-centered learning strategies. The teachers described using a range of SCL strategies such as group learning, discovery learning and research activities. The majority of teachers reported group learning as their main SCL teaching practice and provided numerous examples which demonstrated a correlation with student learning outcomes. Ten percent of teachers reported using SCL strategies to promote higher level learning outcomes for students. This understanding is well illustrated by the following teacher comment:

We divide them into groups and ask them to dissect a toad. In the dissection of the toad, it's not only the organs that they identify, but they also learn how the different systems work in the body and they learn to appreciate the need for the different parts to work together in order to have a functioning system. They can then apply this to their life and other learning.

Teachers also reported an understanding and application of other SCL methods, however, these

were mentioned with less frequency and by less than half the participants. Regardless of the strategy, all teachers in non-TVET subject areas described their main practices in the final two years of secondary school (Forms 6 and 7) as very focused on the external examinations. The teachers claimed that examination results are of paramount importance, in particular Form 6, since it is regarded as a critical performance measure of schools, and consequently themselves as teachers.

Accordingly, many teachers reported shifting from SCL strategies to more teacher-directed strategies in these final years of schooling. On this, they argued that the design of the examination assessment system was focused on content and thus student learning did not require discovery and experiential learning. Thus the teachers described using practices such as handing out copious student notes, dictating notes, reading information, and having students memorise, rote-learn and repeat facts. They justified this shift by claims that they were 'under pressure' to deliver a demanding curriculum to these senior years with limited time available for lesson preparation.

The teachers also claimed that they did not have the skills to efficiently manage all the demands in their teaching lives. Consequently, the teachers described their working environment as one where they worked independently and excessive hours to the detriment of their health and family lives. The teachers claimed to receive little if any support from their school or the Ministry of Education. On the subject of support systems the teachers made reference to only Ministry workshops which they reported were generally conducted during the school holidays in Suva and accordingly were difficult to attend.

Teachers are valued as community role-models and as such there is a high demand for transparency of their work.. This work includes extra-curricular activities which often involve student boarders. Accordingly teachers' tasks are sometimes more closely associated with those typified with parents and guardians. Thus, as teachers hold an important position in their communities the demands for transparency and accountability are high. Accordingly a strong support system is essential for this key workforce.

The findings indicate that the majority of secondary school teachers in Fiji employ effective SCL teaching practices focused on student learning outcomes in the early years of secondary school. However, in the senior years the teachers perceive their practices are constrained by policy related to curriculum, examination results and school performance. Thus, in these senior years teaching practices are reverting to traditional methods of rote-learning, cramming and memorizing for student learning. It is contended that the employment of ineffective teaching practices in the senior years of schooling is limiting progress towards quality education outcomes in Fiji. It is important to note in the analysis that although the majority of teachers reported using sound pedagogical skills their teaching stories did not reflect *adaptive* and *innovative* skills necessary to meet the demands of the changing role of teaching.

INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

At the end of 2010, Fiji abolished three national examinations for years' six, eight and ten levels. In 2015 this situation was changed and examinations were reintroduced. Nevertheless, from

2011 to the present the concept of internal assessment shifted from being formative in nature to also replacing the role of examinations (Ministry of Education National Heritage Culture & Arts, 2012). At the same time Classroom Based Assessments (CBA) were introduced to the Internal Assessment system to support Common Assessment Tasks (CAT). Whilst CATs are designed by the Ministry CBAs are designed, developed and implemented by the teachers. The system of CBAs and CATs remains as part of the 2015 assessment system in secondary schools in Fiji regardless of the reintroduction of the external examinations.

Internal Assessment (IA) embraces a wide range of activities used in ‘assessment for learning’ where teachers engage in ongoing assessment of students’ learning as they learn (Black & William, 1988; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003). The concept of assessment for learning also known as formative assessment represents a fundamental change in the way that schools in Fiji think about the role and nature of assessment. In Fiji for generations, summative assessment (examinations and tests) has dominated most classroom assessment work in secondary schools, where the bulk of teacher time has been taken up with creating tests, marking and grading. It is argued that these kinds of tests provide little direction or advice for improvement. Typically, they don’t give much indication of mastery of particular ideas or concepts because the test content is generally too limited and the scoring is too simplistic to represent the broad range of skills and knowledge that have been covered (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2002; Maxwell, 2004). Thus, there has been a growing acceptance that where assessment is used as a formative element of classroom work, learning and attainment can be significantly enhanced. The Fiji Ministry of Education has supported this global trend in assessment advocated in reforms introduced to the Internal Assessment System (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2013; Ministry of Education National Heritage Culture & Arts, 2012).

The teacher-participants in this study described using a range of IA tasks, including projects, portfolios, research tasks and practical activities. All teachers, with the exception of TVET teachers, reported that the IA system and in particular CBA has an adverse impact on the effectiveness of their teaching practices and subsequently student learning outcomes. The main argument presented by the teachers reflected the traditional view that assessment was ‘of learning’ rather than assessment ‘for learning’. Thus the teachers considered that the process of continually assessing students did not provide teachers with enough time to present the required curriculum content and therefore took time away from student learning.

TVET teachers reported a continuous application of IA tasks throughout all years of secondary schooling, including the higher form levels, since this formative assessment contributes to TVET student final grades. In some TVET subject areas there is no examination and continuous assessment reflects the students’ final grade. However teachers in non-TVET subject areas reported a reduction in IA tasks in the final two years of school. In these years the results of external examinations contributed a high percentage (more than fifty percent) to the final grades. Thus the role and nature of the examination system had a strong influence on the teachers’ views of Internal Assessment.

Nevertheless, all teachers reported that the assessment system required them to undertake an excessive amount of work related to developing CBA tasks, moderation activities, student reports,

records and paperwork. The teachers claimed they did not have the skills to efficiently undertake these numerous tasks within the standard working hours. Accordingly, teachers described their main coping mechanism as 'working in the evenings and on weekends' and at the same time noting that this was 'stressful' and 'restricting time with their families'. Thus, the teachers held the view that reforms to the assessment system had significantly impacted on their capacity to achieve a work-life balance.

At the same time, the teachers described a common practice of sending CBA tasks home as one of their coping mechanisms. On this, they further elaborated on the system which they claimed required all students to pass. They described the situation as follows:

If they don't pass we have to let them keep trying and trying until they do pass. So we send the task home and then their friends or parents or guardians help them so they can pass.

Thus, the situation described by the teachers on internal assessment reflected one where they felt overwhelmed and overworked by a demanding assessment system. Accordingly, some assessment strategies are not focused on student learning outcomes and limiting the effectiveness of the IA and the CBA system in Fijian secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this empirical study suggest that existing strategies and systems that support effective change in teaching practices in Fiji are deficient. Although the teacher participants reported attending workshops and receiving some ad hoc in-service training they continue to employ teaching practices which it is contended are ineffective. It is further contended that although teachers do have skills and knowledge in contemporary pedagogy they do not have the necessary adaptive and innovative skills to meet the changed role of teaching in the 21st century. Such skills include critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration and creativity.

These findings are important for a range of stakeholders since teaching practices have a critical impact on student learning outcomes which in turn affect the human resource capacity of a country. Therefore it is critical that the government, policy makers, teacher educators and school leaders address the situation. In particular, it is suggested that initiatives focus on continuous teacher professional development which has been proven extensively to have an important influence on teaching practices (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Hayes, 2000; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Naylor & Sayed, 2014). Furthermore, it is important to note the absence in the findings of any significant differences between the perceptions of teachers with different levels of teaching qualifications, years of experience, location, ethnicity or gender which suggest these groups are homogenous and a one-size-fits-all approach is suitable.

There are various models and forms of continuing professional development and training which include in-service training workshops and school-based professional support including

mentoring, and peer learning such as teacher study groups (Naylor & Sayed, 2014; Cordingley, Bell, Isham, Evans, & Firth, 2007; Darling-Hamond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, 2009). Furthermore, there is currently much interest in collaborative lesson planning (Khan, 2012; Wang & Lu, 2012), co-teaching (Milne, Scantlebury, Blonstein, & Gleason, 2011) and lesson study (Ono & Ferreira, 2010).

However, in determining the appropriate strategies for Fiji, it is important to note the mixed results of various studies. A survey of a wide range of studies from developing countries found a positive relationship between in-service teacher training and student outcomes, but the relationship was not strong (Glewwe, Hanushek, Humpage, & Ravina, 2011). In contrast, a review of continuous professional development models such as using on-the-job projects and ongoing training in the developed world context found that it generally had a positive effect on student learning and teachers' motivation (Cordingley, Bell, Isham, Evans, & Firth, 2007). It is contended that these mixed results of investigation of ongoing professional development can be explained by the need for customization. In a 2012 report from McKinsey (Jayaram, Moffit, & Scott, 2012) it was contended that in-person, on-site coaching is the most effective way to deliver advice on classroom practice, and that coaching should be the core of any good professional development programme. Similarly, other reviews of effective ongoing professional development (Sayed, 2009; Schwille, Dembele, & Schubert, 2007) argue that training needs to be tailored to teacher needs, provided in schools and focused on teaching approaches and skills that teachers can use in the classroom suggesting a curriculum development approach to CPD.

It is suggested that CPD initiatives which are innovative for Fiji such as co-teaching, lesson study and collaboration are more likely to have an impact than an extension of the existing strategies. Furthermore, a range of CPD strategies which adopt a blended approach are likely to be most successful in promoting the objectives of education for sustainable development (Nevin, 2008; UNESCO, 2012; Wade, 2008).

Whilst the study reported here has established important findings, the scope of the research was limited. Mainly the method used to select the limited number of participants consisted of recruited volunteers. A larger representation of the teacher workforce could be obtained by increasing the scale of the research to include interviews with all teachers in selected schools. On the other hand, using a well-constructed questionnaire would also enable the researcher to access a larger and more diverse teacher population. Therefore the results are in no way fully representative of the teacher workforce in Fiji. Furthermore, due to the small scale of the research reported in this article, corroboration of teachers' perceptions of their practices was not explored. This could be obtained through methods such as observation or obtaining a student voice. Nevertheless, suggestions from this study in Fiji can be used to inform other similar developing countries. Additionally, the study will inform further research into areas of quality teaching such as the correlation of elements of teacher competency with student learning outcomes.

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