

Quality Teachers and Teacher Education in Fiji

Identities, Challenges & Priorities

Final Report
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Research carried out through a partnership between The University of the South Pacific, the University of Bristol and the University of Nottingham



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Executive Summary

Teacher education and preparedness are two core issues that have remained high on the educational agenda in the Pacific islands for some time. In Fiji, quality of teacher preparedness and quality of teaching were initially documented in the 1969 and 2000 Fiji Education Commission Reports. Since then, numerous aid funded projects such as Basic Education & Life Skills (BELS) and Basic Educational Management and Teacher Upgrading Project (BEMTUP) in the late 1990s, Pacific Regional Initiative for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) and Fiji Education Section Project (FESP) in the mid to late 2000s and most recently Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP) 2011, have initiated various efforts towards raising the quality of teachers. Despite the continuous filtering of foreign aid towards improving the quality of teachers and teaching in Fiji and the wider Pacific, there remain widely held assumptions about the general lack of professionalism and competency of teachers, with questions regarding the ability of teachers to generate positive learning experiences and student academic success.

This report presents the findings of a study conducted with teachers, student teachers and teacher educators at the three major universities in Fiji. The research aimed 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. Applying a mixed-methods approach, data collection methods include document and policy analysis, questionnaires, classroom observations and two indigenous dialogic research strategies: *talanoa* and *talanga*. Both indigenous methods prioritise dialogic storying. *Talanoa* is most similar to semi-structured interviews and may comprise semi-formal conversations between a researcher and either one on one, or small group discussion. *Talanga*, on the other hand, is more formal in nature and may be likened to focus group discussions.

Participants in this study included Ministry of Education (MOE) officials, teacher educators at the University of the South Pacific (USP), Fiji National University (FNU) and the University of Fiji (UniFiji); and a group of inservice and preservice primary and secondary school teachers at three divisions: Central Division (Suva), Western Division (Nadi), and Northern Division (Labasa); Teacher Unions; AQEP and Fiji Teachers' Registration Board (FTRB).

The findings from research with practitioner stakeholders (teachers, teacher trainees and teacher educators) generate insights into the nature of teacher identity and professionalism, identify key challenges faced in practice, and focus on the priorities that these stakeholders believe are important for the improvement of the quality of education. These challenges and priorities are then considered in the light of an analysis of the changing education policy context and follow up discussions with policy-makers, union representatives and other stakeholders. This leads to the identification of priorities for future policy and practice and a consideration of possible ways forward. At the broadest level, the research reveals unease amongst teachers, teacher trainees and teacher educators alike who are concerned at the extent and pace of across the board system change. This is often perceived to be driven by the influence of changing international practice, combined with efforts to assert national autonomy, supporting a view that a public national forum such as an Education Summit or an Education Commission may be helpful and timely.

Introduction

This report presents an overview of the Teachers and Teacher Education in the Pacific research project. This covers the project rationale, research methodology and methods, the policy context, fieldwork findings and analysis, and implications for future policy and practice.

Project Rationale

Current international debates about education and development, post-2015; place quality at the centre of educational thinking. This has strategic implications for the future of teacher education policy and practice. Given the challenge of balancing the influence of global goals and targets with the demands and conditions of local contexts (Thaman, 2008), the study focuses on documenting and analysing the contemporary Fijian experience. As the most populous of the Pacific Island Countries, Fiji's size and ethnic diversity allows for rich analysis and theorisation in an achievable, cost-effective way.

Like other small states (Crossley, Bray and Packer, 2011), Fiji has responded to quality challenges by prioritising and targeting the improvement of the quality of teaching and teacher education. This has seen some policy borrowing and the application of external standards, despite international evidence indicating that many such reforms fail due to misarticulation with the diverse realities of schools, systems and societies in which teachers work and live (Koya-Vakauta 2012). To understand how this is working out in practice, this research focuses on documenting and analysing the views of practising primary and secondary teachers, student teachers, teacher educators and union representatives on the current nature of teaching and learning in Fijian schools; and, in the light of this, their perspectives on the challenges faced in practice and on future priorities for the improvement of quality education, teacher identities and capabilities. By comparing such stakeholder perspectives with Ministry of Education priorities and policy trends in contemporary Fiji, the research helps to identify locally grounded and practitioner informed priorities for future action. At the same time, the study demonstrates the influence of powerful structural dynamics and global agendas through their impact upon teachers and their work, and upon teacher education policy and practice.

Secondly, the rationale for the full project has a reflective methodological component that was included to generate insights into the processes of international research collaboration from the different perspectives of the research partners. This is designed to contribute to improved understanding of the potential, challenges and realities of cross-cultural research partnerships in education. This dimension of the study is not reported on in detail here.

The project was supported by two funders. The British Academy supported the international research team collaboration and UK based activities. Funding from the University of the South Pacific made the fieldwork, reporting and dissemination activities in Fiji possible.

Research Methodology and Methods

The Research Question

As fieldwork began the initial research question was refined to focus upon:

What are stakeholder perspectives of the nature and quality of teaching in Fijian schools and of teacher education; their understanding of the challenges being faced in practice; and the priorities for attention if the quality of education is to be improved?

The following sections report on how the research was carried out in practice.

Rationale for Blending and Mixing Methods

A largely qualitative methodological approach was emphasised, mixing Western and Pacific techniques, including questionnaires, talanga (consensus building through structured stakeholder consultation), talanoa (dialogic participant–researcher conversations). The overall approach was informed by postcolonial perspectives (Smith, 1999) that also underpinned the partnership strategy, and this inspired the blending of Pacific and western methodologies in particular. This blended and mixed approach was seen as a way of strengthening the robustness of the data through methodological triangulation, and engaging more closely with local stakeholders through the application of Pacific traditions and methodologies.

Key Research Methods, Samples and Research Sites

The sample of participants comprised primary and secondary teachers from the three main centres in Fiji, Suva, Labasa and Lautoka. Teacher trainees and teacher educators at The University of the South Pacific, the Fiji National University and the University of Fiji were also sampled, as well as representatives from the Ministry of Education, AQEP and Fiji Teachers Registration Board. The fieldwork was carried out between May and December of 2015.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed to 75 participants, comprising 15 primary and 15 secondary teachers; 15 primary teacher trainees and 15 secondary teacher trainees; and 15 teacher educators. 69 questionnaires were received back giving a high response rate. In line with the qualitative methodology, the instrument emphasised personal narratives and prioritised open ended questions. The questionnaires were designed to elicit information about general attitudes, beliefs and worldviews of the three groups in direct relation to the three main parts of the core research question: 1. the nature and quality of teaching and learning, 2. challenges faced in practice and 3. priorities for attention relating to the quality of education in the Fiji context.

Talanga and Talanoa Sessions

Talanga (focus group) sessions were conducted at The University of the South Pacific (USP), University of Fiji and Fiji National University (FNU). The locations selected for these sessions were Suva, Labasa and Lautoka. A talanga (focus group) session was organised for six teachers at each location, and a separate session for at least three teacher educators at each participating university. Talanoa (semi-structured interviews) were conducted with two primary and two secondary teachers at each site, and three teacher educators at each university. Talanoa / semi-structured interviews were also organised with Ministry of Education officers. The total number of talanoa sessions numbered 22.

Talanga played a probing role in moving beyond the questionnaire data and as a research method may be likened to focus group discussions. In this study talanga sessions were arranged with groups of five to eight participants. While there is no fixed agreed number of participants in a talanga, it is generally understood that smaller groups make for more meaningful engagement with each participant contributing to the conversation. Koya-Vakauta (2013) explains the difference between talanoa and talanga:

Tālanga provides more structure to the information gathering process than Talanoa, in that it has a designated setting – a plan time, setting and environment, whereas Talanoa may take place anywhere at any time and may involve the free movement of participants in and out of the discussion in a flexibility that Tālanga does not accord (p.145).

In the context of this study, group sessions were pre-arranged and the sessions were guided by a set of predetermined questions. Field research focal points were identified at the three Universities to allow for non-obtrusive data collection particularly of student teachers and teacher educators.

Talanoa sessions also probed further in to the key issues to generate a deeper level of understanding. Talanoa is considered a contextually relevant cultural approach to storying or sharing of personal narratives. Talanoa is generally understood and utilised as a research method by many Pacific scholars (e.g., Vaioleti, 2006; Nabobo-Babu, 2006; Johansson-Fua, 2008; ‘Otunuku, 2011; Naisilisili, 2012; Koya-Vakauta, 2013), most similar to the semi-structured interview. It is described as an informal conversation in which “knowledge is socially constructed” (Johansson-Fua, 2008, p1). While in everyday life, talanoa may take the form of a casual and uni-directional conversation about anything and everything; in research it is more structured. In this study, a set of guiding questions were developed for the talanoa/interview sessions. These provided focus for the field researcher when and if the discussion deviated away from the primary focus of the study.

Data Analysis

Data from questionnaires, talanoa and talanga sessions were manually coded and analysed searching for emerging patterns in the results obtained. Researcher fieldnotes comprising observations and general feedback on the talanoa and talanga were also documented. These findings were written up in the form of detailed texts and narratives for team reading and review,

leading to the identification of key themes. These emergent themes were then reconsidered in the light of the three dimensions of the research question, and from this further reading and review the key challenges and priorities for attention that are reported here were identified. From this the discussion of implications for policy and practice were derived through an iterative process of team reflection, writing and discussion.

Ethical Issues

An application to conduct research was submitted to the Minister of Education, Fiji in 2014 and a permit provided to conduct fieldwork was subsequently obtained. The University of the South Pacific's Human Ethics Research Application was approved, as was that for the University of Bristol, and these were used to secure support from the Fiji National University and the University of Fiji respectively. In a context characterised by recent and rapid policy change the study acknowledges that participants would be aware of professional and personal sensitivities generated by their engagement in critical reflection, and that they could potentially be influenced by power differentials between those involved in talanga, talanoa and other fieldwork discussions.

The Changing Policy Context

Fijian education is still governed by the 1978 Education Act. The Act is a general education law, which is largely concerned with the management and governance of various levels and aspects of the education system. It is a rather administrative piece of legislation that contains little sense of an educational vision or philosophy.

Since 2000 there have been a series of policy initiatives that have responded to concerns that the Act, and linked practices, are in need of revision. These include the Education Commission Report (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2000), the Systems-based Curriculum Mapping Exercise (ongoing since 2003) and the Suva Declaration (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2005). From 2007, these initiatives fed into the attempt to develop a National Curriculum Framework.

Discussions around the new Framework were driven by concerns that the curriculum suffered from content overload, repetition and poor sequencing. There were also concerns that the curriculum met neither the needs of the labour market nor demands for cultural appropriateness.

The Education Act was reviewed in 2013 and is currently in draft form pending a decision from the Solicitor General's Office. Around the same time, the NCF was published. In contrast with the Education Act, it outlines a strong philosophical position, stating that its mission is:

To provide a holistic, inclusive, responsive and empowering education system that enables all children to realize their full potential, appreciate fully their inheritance, take pride in their national and cultural identity and contribute fully to sustainable national development (Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2013a, p. 1).

The underlying guiding principles informing this mission and vision are social constructivism, Delors' Pillars of Education and cultural influences. Under the principle of social constructivism, it advocates for active learning, learning as a social process and students as agents of their own learning. From the Delors' Pillars of Education, it draws on learning to know, do, be and live together. And, thirdly, under the principle of cultural influences, it promotes a culturally democratic curriculum, cultural inclusive pedagogies and learning about inclusivity and diversity (Ibid, pp. 12 – 16).

Although some progress was made towards developing new curricula emphasising these values and focusing on learner outcomes and trying to break the hold of examinations on learning, the status of the NCF is unclear after the 2014 elections. While the NCF is still seen as the guiding policy document by MoE officials, there remains a challenge in aligning this with recent policy statements and directions.

The most significant new policy statement was released in October 2015, and is clustered under three main pillars: (1) content review and development; (2) delivery by our teachers; and (3) improvement of infrastructure. NCF is not mentioned anywhere in the text and, indeed, plans were announced to conduct a comprehensive curriculum review “to bring it to par with the curriculum of schools in Australia, New Zealand and India” to be conducted in 2016. This is coupled with a commitment to ensure teachers teach the whole of existing syllabi; a reinstatement of national examinations where they had been reduced; and an end to teachers' role in examination paper setting.

The October 2015 reforms also contain a strong focus on teachers under the two headings of teacher training and recruitment and teacher competencies, assessment and leadership. Under the former, the Ministry states its intention to continue dialogue with teacher education providers with a view to adopt a common education curriculum by 2016 to ensure that they “will learn the same skills and have the same teacher training and subject delivery skills” (p.2). Teacher numbers will be increased and more specialist teachers introduced into upper primary years. Where there are surplus applicants for teacher education places, selection will be on school grade point averages.

The Ministry reiterates that teachers are encouraged to upgrade their qualifications. From 2016 a Basic English Proficiency test for all teachers in Fiji will be administered “to ensure competency of teachers in both oral and written English” (Ibid). Additionally, teacher assessment now comprises student assessment of their teachers; an assessment by the immediate supervisor; and the outcome of external examination results. Counselling is identified as a core skill required by all teachers and while the Ministry has confirmed it is providing counselling services to students through the establishment of full-time counsellors at the 9 district offices, there is emphasis on “equipping every teacher with basic counselling skills” (p.3). Finally, temporary appointment of roving Head Teachers and Principals will see experienced and proven school heads relocated to assist in development of “underperforming schools for a short period while mentoring the new appointee” (Ibid).

Although not part of this policy trajectory, it is also worth noting that a new Teacher Code of Ethics was announced in 2013, which complements the existing Public Sector Commission Code

of Conduct, to which public teachers are subject (Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2013b).

The four-page Code of Ethics comprises five sections; general, professional goals, professional conduct, professional commitment and unethical conduct. The first general section emphasises ethics, democratic principles, equal educational opportunities and the general overall responsibility of teachers. Three professional goals are specified in the second section: (1) teacher competencies in terms of formal qualification, knowledge and skills; (2) reflective teaching practice in personal “continuing inquiry and evaluation of the teaching process” (p.2); and (3) human development and society. The professional conduct section presents a summary of a teacher’s commitment and obligation as a professional educator. These relate to supporting Fiji’s broad educational goals; serving the community; respecting and responding to the diversity of children’s learning abilities; partnership with parents and the wider community; enhancing the professional image of teachers; and collegiality within the teaching fraternity. The professional commitment section outlines the chain of command and responsibilities of a Fijian teacher relating to maintaining professional standards; supporting the teaching fraternity; demonstrating integrity in their work; and abiding by Ministry of Education guidelines. The final section outlines examples of unethical conduct.

Findings and Analysis: Practitioner Stakeholders

Introduction

This section looks across the material stemming from the analysis of the questionnaires and talanga and talanoa sessions with teachers, teacher trainees and teacher educators in the light of the three dimensions of the core research question: the nature and quality of teaching and teacher education; the challenges faced in practice; and priorities for attention for the improvement of the quality of education in Fiji.

The Nature and Quality of Teaching and Teacher Education

The study was designed to foreground questions of educators’ vision of the “ideal Fijian teacher”, implicitly stressing the contextualised nature of quality. This issue appears to be a very topical one given the significant change in emphasis from the Ministry during the fieldwork period. This was followed by reflections on why people became teachers. The ideal teacher was contrasted in discussions with participants about their perceptions of the current state of teaching and the teaching profession. There was also a discussion about the quality of teacher education.

The “ideal Fijian teacher”

The research identified quite widespread consensus amongst sampled teachers, student teachers and teacher educators regarding the attributes of the “ideal Fijian teacher”. Findings were largely consistent across all three groups and across the three data gathering processes. Eight attributes emerged, although there is inevitable overlap between them.

First, the ideal teacher is seen to be guided by the expectations of national policies, standards and curricula. Student teachers in particular stressed that teachers should meet Ministry rules and regulations; whilst qualified teachers emphasised working hard to meet Ministry deadlines, a point that was seen strongly in the student teacher contributions to the talanga process. The teacher educators did not contradict the importance of national standards but put an additional emphasis on commitment to the school mission and culture. Strikingly, there was a strong emphasis in applying the philosophy of the NCF. Given the uncertainty about the NCF’s future and the continuity of overall national educational philosophy, it will be interesting to see whether this reflects some degree of distance between Ministry and educator views about the future direction of Fijian education. In this light, there appeared also to be some sense amongst teachers that there might be two views of the “ideal Fijian teacher”: one which privileged work towards examination results alone, and another that gave more weight to lifelong learning and wider notions of quality education and professional identity formation.

Second, the ideal teacher has a strong sense of teacher identity and is guided by professional ethics and moral standards. There was a clear sense of professional identity expressed. However, there were interesting variations across stakeholder groups. Student teachers tended to stress an awareness of the identity of the teacher as well-prepared, hard-working and focused on the academic success of students. This was not contradicted by teachers and teacher educators but they put more emphasis on teacher collegiality; on holistic child development; and on building relationships of trust. There was specific mention of the Code of Ethics from student teachers but all groups concurred that teachers should have high standard of ethics, morals and conduct. Many of the themes of the Code were present in written and verbal contributions across the stakeholder groups. The views expressed seem highly congruent with Ministry positions. Interestingly, a number of teachers’ were not aware of the Teacher Code of Ethics prior to participating in the study.

Third, the ideal teacher has a passion for teaching and facilitating student learning. Student teachers did agree with this but had a more restricted view, as expressed in the previous paragraph’s account of their idea of the teacher as professional. Teachers developed this notion further, to include the creation of a positive learning environment; motivation and facilitation of learning; and a stress on helping all students to achieve both system and personal goals. Much of this was echoed by teacher educators, who also emphasised an ability to respond positively to constructive criticism; a focus on planning and resourcefulness; a commitment to accountability; and leadership qualities.

Fourth, the ideal teacher is cognisant of cultural, social and learning contexts in the classroom. In order to facilitate student learning and to be professional, it was widely stated that teachers needed to be well-informed about a number of contexts. Student teachers particularly highlighted

the importance of emotional intelligence; whilst all had a sense of the importance of cultural values and Fiji's multicultural nature. Sensitivity to learner diversity was also valued, with teacher educators introducing the importance of using this diversity to enhance the learning experience.

Fifth, the ideal teacher is well versed with subject content knowledge. Indeed, this was so universally accepted that it saw little elaboration by the participants.

Sixth, the ideal teacher keeps up to date with pedagogical developments, is innovative and applies a wide range of teaching strategies to enhance student learning. For all participants, having a wide repertoire of pedagogical tools, which reflected current thinking, was seen as essential to be a good teacher.

Seventh, the ideal teacher prioritises student learning needs and safety. Teacher educators particularly emphasised the holistic development of the child. Teachers, perhaps cognisant of the current debate about teachers as counsellors, stressed the importance of this role and the need to understand, value and nurture students. Indeed, they saw the welfare of students as a major priority. Student teachers stressed equity and ensuring that students felt safe and comfortable in the classroom.

Eighth, the ideal teacher sees a value for education beyond the schooling experience. Some teachers noted that teaching is a human encounter that extends beyond content knowledge, and there was a strong emphasis from them on lifelong learning, mirroring some of the language of the NCF. From some students, there was a focus on developing global citizens, reflecting international educational discourse.

Across these eight domains it is possible to see an interesting overall discourse of the ideal nature of teachers and teaching. There is much acceptance about the performance / accountability elements of teaching: that teachers should be hard-working, focused on learning outcomes / examination results and responsive to the bureaucratic requirements of the system. However, there appears to be a stronger sense of the importance of a lifelong and lifewide view of education expressed by these practitioners, and of equity and embeddedness in culture and community. Most accounts seemed able to articulate an accommodation between these two strands. However, there were significant voices that pointed to concerns about the increasing visibility and influence of a policy shift towards the former and away from the latter.

Why do Teachers Choose to Teach?

In keeping with the discussion of the ideal teacher, the vast majority of participants presented themselves as called to teaching. There was much stress on active choice of the teaching profession driven by a personal ambition to change lives and inspire students. Whilst this was mainly presented as a personal matter of calling, there were some mentions of gaining inspiration from existing teachers.

Of course, there may be need for caution against an overly-romantic view of teachers as being called to serve. There is an inevitable danger that the data represents some “correct” answering of the question. Some participants did offer less vocational responses, noting the power of parental direction and the attractiveness of a secure job. A small number also acknowledged the lack of other viable choices. Interestingly, this was a more frequent response in talanga sessions than in the questionnaires.

General Perception of Teachers and the Teaching Profession in Fiji

There was considerable focus in questionnaire responses and in talanga and talanoa sessions on the status of teaching as a respected profession and a restatement of teachers’ own beliefs about teaching as a calling. However, this was in stark contrast to concerns that teachers were treated as being “simply civil servants”, and low paid and over-worked ones.

There was also some reaffirmation of the teaching profession as well-educated and high-performing. However, this was contrasted with apparently very honest concerns about the state of the profession. A number of participants across all groups thought that teachers collectively were struggling with the pace of reform and lacked the necessary skills and knowledge to cope with the current changes.

There were some concerns that teacher quality was low and falling, and that this was reflected in disappointing examination results. However, most participants thought that the quality of teaching and learning was of an average level.

There was much in the responses that sought to place the blame for the poor status of teachers and quality of teaching on the Ministry, rather than the profession. This is reflected in the complaints noted above about pay and workload. To this were added critiques of how the overloaded syllabi and rate of central directives stifled innovation.

Most strikingly, in spite of the emphasis in much of the discussion of the ideal teacher about notions of learner-centred education, of the teacher as facilitator and the primacy of the learning, it was widely believed that teacher-centredness predominated in practice in Fijian classrooms. Whilst some argued that the Ministry was responsible for this and saw it as trying to heighten teacher-centredness through emergent policy trajectories, it is implausible that very recent policy directives alone are at the root of what are more likely to be deep-seated cultures of teaching and learning.

What is apparent from the data overall is that there is deep concern about the future direction of both teachers’ work and teaching. This appears to be coupled with important questions about the overall Fijian philosophy of teaching and learning.

The Quality of Teacher Education in Fiji

Given the above sub-section, it is not surprising to find that there were related concerns about teacher education. In the questionnaires, most student teachers raised issues about low entry requirements (something the Ministry has pledged to address) and an over-theoretical approach with too few practical components and a need for a stronger practicum experience. A number of teachers believed that these weaknesses were reflected in practice through new teachers' inability to contextualise their teaching and to adjust to the school environment. Teacher educators also raised similar concerns as well as more technical issues about the assessment of the practicum.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Practice

Looking across the data from the questionnaires and the talanga and talanoa sessions held with teachers, teacher trainees and teacher educators, perceptions of the main challenges faced by practicing teachers can be considered in six categories. These consist of challenges related to 1. the Ministry of Education level; 2. the school level; 3. the teacher; 4. the curriculum; 5. students and 6. the community.

1. The Ministry of Education Level

A most prominent challenge perceived by all stakeholders at this level is the rapid pace of educational reform, repeated shifts relating to policy, curriculum and assessment, and associated changes in regulations and procedures.

Talanga sessions thus reveal significant teacher stress and frustration with what are perceived to be overwhelming and uncoordinated curriculum changes being rolled out. Teachers and trainees reported a sense of what was described as reform lethargy in the face of the frequency of Ministerial circulars requiring rapid change. As one secondary school teacher reported, 'We are like machines. We don't get to think anymore'. Teachers expressed general disappointment at lack of teacher consultation in the numerous changes being implemented and concern at the pace and number of new initiatives. They said they were confused about whether to follow the NCF principles when implementing the new initiatives particularly in regard to assessment and examinations. There was overwhelming frustration at the new teach-3-terms worth of work/content in two terms and revise for the entire Term 3. Teachers spent a lot of time emphasising their disappointment at the swift return to external examinations, saying that they and their students had just become familiarised with and confident in the internal assessment processes. They emphasised the importance of Assessment for learning (AfL), as stated in the NCF, which was now seemingly side-lined in lieu of the Assessment of Learning (AoL) via examinations.

A related challenge concerns the emergence of a perceived mismatch between the educational philosophy articulated in the NCF and the MOE's new assessment policy. Thus talanoa sessions reported how many stakeholders were concerned about the intensification of examination pressures on pedagogy within schools, on a challenge to the holistic vision of education, how

many teacher trainees and teacher educators were not aware of the newly implemented 2015 teacher assessment criteria, and how teachers themselves felt they were struggling to keep up with the pace of reform. In the talanga sessions the teachers shared the view that the current fast paced multi-faceted reform across the board and on numerous levels was the biggest risk to compromising an already cluttered system. Talanga participants also argued that policy reform was partly driven by international policy and the national desire to remain comparable without due contextualisation taking place.

2. The School Level

At the school level the most prominent challenges that were reported related to working in rural and remote locations. This was combined with the lack of resources and facilities, poor quality textbooks, limited access to technology and low level of support from school administrations and school boards. In the talanoa sessions teachers expressed a desire for better and improved school leadership to ensure quality education. One teacher thus shared his view of what he termed to be a leadership crisis with the loss of many experienced teachers and school administrators when the retirement age was reduced to 55.

3. The Teacher

Teacher-related challenges highlighted perceptions of heavy workloads related to student-teacher ratios, composite classes, increased paperwork and extra curricula responsibilities. Teacher stress was identified in particular relation to closer monitoring by the MOE, reduced starting salaries for pre-service teachers and limited promotion opportunities. New graduates participating in talanga sessions thus complained about their lower starting salaries when compared to diploma holding nurses.

Time constraints were highlighted as a major challenge by teachers when trying to fit what they perceived as overloaded curriculum content into the school year. Evidence from talanga sessions thus reveals that many teachers reported it was not a good time to be a teacher in Fiji, particularly if you are responsible for an examination form, as evening and Saturday classes meant even less time for family and other responsibilities. Indeed, some teachers spoke of the need for an explicit discussion regarding the question of teachers' rights, to complement the themes raised in the Code of Ethics.

Of particular significance to most teachers were challenges generated by their responsibility for examination results, and the potential blame associated with poor student performance. There were concerns that the teacher review questionnaire might exacerbate this. Other competency and capability challenges faced by teachers that were 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. As noted above, there were significant concerns raised about the quality and relevance of teacher education.

4. The Curriculum

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. As one indigenous female primary school teacher reported:

A Fijian teacher works hard to meet due dates, to meet submission of official records that in most cases or times, children's learning times are used to complete records. A Fijian teacher teaches from the text-book supplied by the MOE and using the exam papers supplied as to produce good results, rather than their life-long learning. (Female, 36 years old; iTaukei primary school teacher)

This is supported by the questionnaires where the majority of teachers agreed that the focus of teaching is on the transmission of facts for rote learning and that many teachers were not encouraging active learning.

The quality of the new curriculum was also emphasised as a challenge with teachers arguing that some of the new text-books were of inferior quality and contained many errors. They also highlighted problems with sequencing of the curriculum, with some content placed at very high levels beyond students' prior learning and knowledge.

5. Students

Student related challenges that were perceived to be significant emphasised those stemming 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. Talanoa findings thus reveal 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.

6. Community

A final set of challenges faced by Fijian teachers were seen to relate to the wider community, to cultural and language barriers and a lack of parental support. Questionnaire findings thus revealed that the majority of teachers surveyed believe they are not well respected in society and they need more support in terms of resources, guidelines and salaries. Similarly, teacher educators perceived a decline in societal respect for teachers and a lack of appreciation of them as professionals. The talanoa sessions thus suggested that much public discourse appears to be finger pointing at the teaching workforce for the failings of the education system, and in particular for low literacy and numeracy rates and poor examination results.

Priorities for Attention for the Improvement of the Quality of Education

Closer analysis of the above research findings and the key challenges perceived by teachers, teacher trainees and teacher educators in practice reveals a number of priorities for attention from the perspectives of these stakeholders. Understanding these practitioner stakeholder perspectives, it is argued, is important if the chances of successful policy implementation are to be maximised. The main priorities identified are as follows:

1. Strengthened consultation and collaboration between the MOE, teacher education providers and the teaching profession.
2. More realistically paced, consistent and coordinated reform processes.
3. Clarification of the place of the NCF in ongoing reform.
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.
5. Strengthened levels of support for rural and isolated schools.
6. Improved access to and provision of school leadership training.
7. A more realistic appreciation of teacher workloads.
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.
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.

11. The resolution of tensions between an emergent content and examinations driven curriculum and the benefits of active learning and learner centred pedagogy.
12. Systematic evaluation of the quality of new text books and the sequencing of content within the new curriculum.
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 following section now considers the implications of these key challenges and priorities, as identified by practitioners, for ongoing policy and practice in the light of the earlier review of the changing policy context, and with reference to follow up talanga and talanoa sessions carried out with policy makers, union representatives and other related stakeholders.

Implications for Policy and Practice in Fiji

In the light of the key challenges and priorities that are identified by practitioner stakeholders in the sections above, this section considers implications for future policy and practice. This is done with reference to the analysis of policy documents and trends identified in the policy context section, and include issues raised by policy makers, union representatives and other stakeholders reported in follow up talanga and talanoa sessions.

Initial consideration is given to how the practitioner stakeholder priorities that are identified above relate to existing system-wide developments that are reflected in our earlier analysis of the current and changing education policy context. In doing this we first identify those practitioner priorities that contemporary educational policy appears to be attending to; secondly we identify those that are being considered but where our participants suggest greater attention is needed; and thirdly we identify new priorities that this research suggests need urgent attention. This framework is designed to provide helpful and grounded insights and policy guidance for decision-makers concerned with the further improvement of the quality of education in practice.

Firstly, in the list of practitioner stakeholder priorities identified in the previous section, six out of the total of 15 can be seen to be already attracting priority attention in recent policy initiatives and the three pillars of the October 2015 MoE statement. These six priorities are those that focus on strengthening support for rural and isolated schools; improved provision of school leadership training; enhanced and extended Continuing Professional Development for all teachers; the improvement of student attitudes towards learning, tests and examinations; the ongoing adaptation of the curriculum to labour market needs and cultural appropriateness; and the revision of teacher education curriculum, including the practicum. These findings suggest an encouraging degree of agreement and support for such policy developments in Fiji from our practitioner participants. This, in turn, strengthens the case for these priorities to be maintained and enhanced at all levels.

Secondly, while six more of the practitioner priorities in our list of 15 may be reflected to some extent in current policy, the research evidence suggests that these areas deserve much more concerted and sustained attention if the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning in practice is to be significant and sustainable. These six priorities are those that focus on the strengthening of consultation and collaboration between the MoE, teacher education providers and the teaching profession; clarification of the place of the NCF in ongoing reform; a more realistic appreciation of teacher workloads; improved societal recognition and respect for the teaching profession; consideration of time constraints on curriculum coverage and the school year; and the systematic evaluation of new curricula, text books and content sequencing. In this regard the research evidence is, therefore, more contested, revealing difference between the views of practitioner stakeholders and specific initiatives and policy trajectories, and suggesting a need for further critical attention to address the related challenges and concerns raised.

Thirdly, three of the priorities identified by the practitioner stakeholders are new in their current form and deserve particularly careful and urgent attention at the policy level. These call for the more focussed attention of decision-makers on establishing realistically paced, consistent and coordinated reform; the need for critical reflection on the implications and possible unintended effects of the intensification of examination pressures on the national philosophy of education, pedagogy, the quality of education, the teaching profession and teacher education; and the resolution of tensions between a re-emergent content and examinations driven curriculum and the benefits of active learning and learner centred pedagogy.

It is hoped that this threefold framework will in itself help to focus attention on areas of greatest priority for future policy and practice from the perspective of practitioners. This, we argue is essential in any education system is to maximise its chances of successful implementation. Throughout this report we have, however, also taken care to consider the practitioner stakeholder findings in the light of the views of policy-makers and other professional stakeholders, and within the framework provided by the current and emergent education policy context. The intention is to generate helpful and well-grounded insights along with broader suggestions for possible ways forward. It is to the latter considerations that we now turn.

Looking to the Future

In reflecting upon the above for possible ways forward there appears to be a need for a new statement of teacher standards and rights. Whilst the Fiji Teacher Code of Ethics covers some aspects of this, two challenges emerge from this study. Firstly, a number of teachers appear to be unfamiliar with this important document, so it is imperative to create greater awareness about the Code. Secondly, however, as part of a wider debate about Fiji's education vision (see below), there is a need to have a wider discussion addressing teacher standards and rights, as reflected in talanoa discussions with Ministry officials. A formalisation of such standards and associated rights should be led by the MoE but this also needs a strong partnership with teachers and their unions, the Fiji Teachers' Registration Board (FTRB), teacher education providers and the Fiji Higher Education Commission. New and more comprehensive standards will then need to inform curricula and assessment in initial teacher education, as well as be reflected in continuing professional development activities. Crucially, as indicated during discussions with Ministry officials, the standards must also be well-disseminated to teachers in order that they inform their work and professionalism throughout the duration of their career lifetimes.

Internationally, initial teacher education is often an area of tension between universities, who value their institutional autonomy, and ministries concerned with effective human resource development. As Ministry stakeholders emphasised, the development of new standards needs universities as partners, alongside the Fiji Higher Education Commission. It is also timely that teacher education providers engage more purposefully with the Fiji Teacher Registration Board to ensure that their graduates meet the requirements the Board has for a Fijian teacher. There will also need to be careful consideration of how a move towards common Fijian teacher standards and a subsequent core set of initial teacher education competencies or learning outcomes interacts with the particular status of USP as a national and regional provider of initial teacher education, with a duty to engage with the needs of 12 Ministries of Education.

As practitioner and Ministry stakeholders stressed in talanoa and talanga discussions, continuing professional development programmes for teachers is another area of priority that the Ministry will have to consider further, again in partnership with other actors. The research suggests a number of continuing technical development needs amongst teachers relating to issues such as curriculum delivery and assessment of student learning. However, it is also apparent that many teachers lack sufficient understanding of the MoE's emerging new philosophy for Fijian education.

All of these more focused implications for initial and continuing teacher education, as well as teacher standards, point to a wider issue that is at the heart of this project's findings: a debate about the underlying philosophy for Fijian education.

As has been noted, the NCF appeared to crystallise a particular approach to what Fijian education should look like. However, its status was seen to be unclear to many participants in the light of the October 2015 communications. Discussions with Ministry stakeholders, however, did confirm that the NCF was still the guiding policy document of Fijian education. However, they noted that a better alignment of this with the October 2015 reforms will take place in 2016. In common with most countries, Fiji can therefore be seen to be wrestling with major tensions

between the desire to reflect learner centred principles, national history and culture in pedagogy and curricula and the need to ensure performance, accountability and benchmarking against international standards.

Fijian education is still governed by the 1978 Act, although a redraft was developed in 2013. The 1978 Act never amounted to a vision for Fijian education and the need to revisit its provisions and, more importantly, outline a shared educational vision seems pressing nearly 40 years on. Thus, there now appears to be a moment to engage stakeholders in open dialogue and purposeful consultation with a view to the formulation of the planned new Act. Participants in this research suggested a follow up to both the 2000 Education Commission and the 2005 Education Summit. The combination of the two processes could offer both a comprehensive evidence-based audit of the education system from policy through to practice and a multi-stakeholder dialogue about desired future directions.

A new Act could also provide for the clarification of a renewed philosophy for Fijian education but also address some of the details that remain challenging regarding issues such as teachers' rights and duties; as well as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. This could serve as the starting point, and way forward for improved consultation and the better communication of national positions on all of these matters to teachers, teacher educators and other stakeholders.

As well as the evidence gathering necessary for a new Education Commission, there is a need for further educational research examining the Fijian school and classroom and, in particular, teacher, student and parent perceptions about and aspirations for the quality of teaching and learning. There may be potential in this way for further collaborative efforts between the MoE and universities around how well-targeted research could support sustainable improvement to Fijian education. This could, for example, begin with the compilation of a list of research priority areas which students considering Master of Arts, and PhD studies in Fijian education might address.

Finally, there is evidence of widespread commitment to Fijian education throughout this research, but also of some confusion and contention regarding the perceived direction of policy. Here, there is a real and positive opportunity for a new Fijian education dialogue, leading to a new vision that all stakeholders can then embrace and implement.

Conclusion

This research represents a collaborative effort that has brought together an international team of researchers interested in the quality of education and the implications of this for teachers, teaching and teacher education in Fiji. It is hoped that the findings will help to inform debates about the quality of education in realistically grounded ways that may contribute to future improvements in teaching and teacher education policy and practice. Further work will explore the theoretical and methodological implications of the research and the key findings. Beyond this it is hoped that the partnership and collaboration itself has helped all team members to strengthen their own capabilities and research experience in ways that will have lasting benefit.

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