

## PROBLEM OF TEACHER SUPPLY AND DEMAND IN FIJI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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### **The need for adequate staffing**

In order to improve the quality of primary education, an important resource is required and that is the teachers. Education ultimately depends on what goes on in the classrooms, which in turn depends on the availability of teachers in adequate numbers and quality. There can be enough school buildings and good classrooms, resource materials, appropriate funds allocated and high pupil enrolment. The value of all these is reduced if there is an inadequate supply of suitable teachers.

In many developing countries teachers are still the primary agents for the transmission of knowledge (UNESCO, 1988). An adequate cadre of appropriately prepared teachers is a prerequisite for a primary education system to function effectively, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. If an adequate supply of teachers is not provided, then student learning in the short-term, and educational standards in the long term, are likely to be adversely affected.

### **Current policy on staffing**

To cope with the currently high demand for education, a planned provision of teachers is necessary. However, in planning for teacher supply, administrators often only consider the teacher-pupil ratio to apply to the school system as a whole. In Fiji, the Ministry of Education's teacher supply policy is based solely on teacher-pupil ratio; (TPR) of 1:30.

### **Weaknesses of the current policy**

By any standards, the national teacher-pupil ratio is only a crude statistic. It does not imply that each teacher has 30 pupils to teach during a given time or class period in all schools in the country. In reality, it is possible to find classes with significantly smaller or larger numbers than the national TPR. In addition, when compiling these statistics, consideration is not given to other factors such as the workload of teachers, ancillary duties and the need for release of teachers for approved special reasons, such as maternity leave, study leave and national service.

A 1995 survey conducted by the writer (Lingam, 1996) of 25 Fiji primary schools, revealed that teachers perform several non-teaching tasks in addition to teaching duties. Teachers' responses indicated that they were also responsible for extra curricular activities such as being in charge of Scouts, Brownies, Red Cross and Road Patrol. Fundraising activities is another area which teachers are expected to engage in.

In the boarding schools, teachers have additional responsibilities. Teachers in these schools carry out supervision of students' duties, before, during and after school hours. (Qovu, 1996). A first year teacher, Masirewa (1995:5), commenting about a rural school said that:

Another part of being in a rural school is the early start to supervise the hostel students, some as young as five. The Class One students must do their chores from 6am to 6.45am. Their duties include picking up rubbish, tidying the compound and other light chores.

The extra responsibilities as well as long hours of work that teachers in boarding schools have to do are not included in teacher-pupil ratio statistics.

There are, therefore, several duties teachers are expected to perform which are not classroom teaching duties but are related to the welfare and safety of the students. These duties are directly related to the students' learning. Such situations are not unique to Fiji, but present in other countries as well. For example, in the United States, teachers have expressed their concern about increasing workloads. Bennett and Le Compte (1990:136) reported that:

While the work of teachers ostensibly is teaching, they do many other things besides teach; they develop instructional materials, coach athletic teams, sponsor extracurricular activities, serve on committees related to the academic and

administrative operation of schools, engage in tutoring and counselling of students and perform social work duties for their families, and do police work in school corridors, lunchrooms, playgrounds, toilets and buses.

Consequently, the enlarged workload of teachers should be taken into account when planning for teacher supply and demand.

Therefore, although teacher-pupil ratio is a very valuable consideration, it cannot alone contribute to sensible and sensitive planning of teacher supply and demand. Other factors such as non-teaching duties, class size and class organisation also need to be taken into account. Provision should also be made for regular in-service opportunities to keep teachers abreast of developments and to maintain their morale. If all the above are taken into consideration, the quality of education could surely be improved.

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