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## **Introduction**

This paper highlights the benefits of the collaborative approach recently employed by the Basic Education Management and Teacher Upgrading Project (BEMTUP) in reviewing the upper primary curriculum courses at Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC). The paper begins with a brief background of the context. This is followed by an outline of the BEMTUP work at the college and then finally discusses the professional benefits of the collaborative approach in curriculum review. The data was obtained from a survey which used a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of one question: What are your comments on each of these areas in relation to the counterpart training you had with the BEMTUP advisors? The areas were listed: English, social science, maths and science.

## **Background**

Lautoka Teachers' College was established in 1977 as another government-run primary teacher education institution besides Nasinu Teachers' College (NTC). The rationale for the establishment of this institution was to

- provide in-service and refresher courses for licensed primary teachers,
- offer a pre-service course to primary school teachers, and
- increase the workforce of trained teachers in order to:
  - i) meet the demand for the annual increase in teacher demand,
  - ii) replace existing untrained teachers with trained teachers (Ministry of Education, 1975).

However, LTC was short lived in terms of serving all the purposes for which it was

originally set up. In 1982, the Fiji Government closed down the other government-run primary teachers' college – NTC.

This left LTC as the sole government-run primary teacher education institution. As a result, the college changed its role exclusively to pre-service training of teachers. To date, the college has maintained this role and provides the bulk of teachers needed for primary schools in Fiji.

## **Basic Education Management and Teacher Upgrading Project – BEMTUP, Fiji**

This project was funded by the Australian Government and operated by Griffith University in association with the University of Wollongong (Faculty of Education), the NSW Department of School Education and the University of the South Pacific (Institute of Education). The project consisted of different components, namely:

- upgrading of class 7 and 8 teachers in the core subject areas of English, social science, maths and science and
- improvements to the information/data collection section of the Ministry of Education and Technology for the purposes of educational management.

At LTC, a small scale review of the teacher education programme was carried out. Specifically, the following were the objectives of the BEMTUP component at LTC:

- to advise and assist in revising the units related to the four subject areas of the upper primary curriculum,
- to advise and assist in the implementation of the revised units,

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- to provide appropriate resources for the teaching of the revised units (BEMTUP 1998).

To carry out these activities, four BEMTUP advisors were attached at the college for a semester. Dr Max Kemp, Ms Helen Pengelly, Ms Kathryn Kelly and Mrs Sereana Tagivakatini worked with English, Mathematics, Social Science and Science Departments respectively. These advisors had specialised in their subject areas and most of them had a wealth of experience working as teacher educators.

Although not mentioned in the original Terms of Reference, the LTC Department of Education was also provided with appropriate resources, and its staff also worked with BEMTUP advisors.

### **Collaborative Approach and the Professional Benefits**

The work of revising these elements of the pre-service certificate programme was not carried out by the BEMTUP advisors on their own but was done with the counterpart lecturers in each department. The advisors shared the offices of the department lecturers and this enabled the advisors and the counterpart lecturers to work closely with one another.

Stemming from a concern with the style of teaching in the primary schools, the review was based on a constructivist perspective of teaching and learning. This involves teachers creating opportunities for the children to be actively involved in learning through activities such as group work, discussion and observation. These methods enhance pupil activity during the teaching and learning process.

Not only was this perspective encouraged in revising the units, but also the trainee teachers were encouraged to implement these practices in their classrooms whilst on practice teaching and also after certification.

Apart from reviewing the courses, the advisors and the counterpart lecturers

taught the revised courses. This was done through team teaching. In addition, the advisers and the counterpart lecturers were responsible for the course assessment. Assignments were prepared together as were other tasks related to course assessment. The advisors also conducted staff development programmes. A wide range of topics was covered. Some of these included:

- Some key issues about evaluation,
- The BEMTUP English programme,
- Approaches to teaching/learning,
- Teaching mathematics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Furthermore, the advisors instigated some collaborative research projects. For example a research project entitled *Fijian Student Teachers' Styles of Learning Mathematics* was conducted by Lingam (Education Department), Emily (Science Department) and Helen Pengelly (mathematics advisor).

With regard to the course review, the following were some of the comments from the lecturers:

- ... have acquired knowledge and skills of revising pre-service courses.
- ... came to know about the importance of the constructivist approach to teaching and learning.
- The approaches to teaching/learning have changed. More workshops need to be organized rather than just lecturing the students.

Some of the responses on team teaching included:

- Team teaching was encouraging.
- Each member learnt from the other.

Comments on staff development sessions included:

- ... came to know about the work of BEMTUP advisors.
- ... became aware of the changes in the four subject areas.

The acting principal also endorsed the professional benefits gained by the staff during the staff development sessions.

... the staff had gained a lot from having the BEMTUP team in the college for the semester ... staff development sessions had allowed a wide range of topics to be shared and discussed. (BEMTUP, 1998: 26)

With regard to assessment, most of the lecturers reported that they could now use a variety of approaches in assessing students' work. Lecturers' comments included:

- The assignments have also been changed ...
- Concept Mapping, that is, how the different concepts, topics, ideas etc. are related or connected to one another ...
- The use of resource folders and practical assignments during practice teaching were useful.

On research, those who were involved stated they have "gained a lot".

These professional benefits would not have been possible if there had been only occasional visits by the BEMTUP advisors to the college or by imposing the review on the college lecturers from above. This collaborative approach encouraged the lecturers and in particular the counterpart lecturers to work hand in hand with the BEMTUP advisors in areas such as curriculum review, teaching, assessing and carrying out other related responsibilities. Quite concretely, the collaborative approach led to some of the following professional gains at the college:

- 1) lecturers have acquired new ideas and have advanced their knowledge of their respective courses;
- 2) they have enhanced their skills in reviewing courses;
- 3) they have come to know about some skills needed for conducting research, and

- 4) they have become aware of the reforms in other subject areas.

It was good that the constructivist perspective was encouraged in the initial teacher preparation programme in order for it to become a part of the teachers' professional development. As aptly stated by Fosnot (1993: 27):

Just as young learners construct, so too, do teachers ... teacher beliefs need to be illuminated discussed and challenged ... Prospective teachers need to confront traditional beliefs, study children's meaning making and experiments collaboratively within a classroom context.

In order for the prospective teachers to demonstrate such practices, the teacher educators need to initially deviate from their traditional roles and practices. They need to demonstrate alternative delivery methods in their courses. This will then make the prospective teachers realize that the role of teachers can no longer be seen as dispensers or transmitters of information but as facilitators of learning.

The final report of BEMTUP (1998) also reaffirms the professional benefits of the college staff. Thus, the collaborative approach undertaken by BEMTUP in reviewing the courses has professionally benefited the college teaching staff who are geographically isolated from most other centres of learning.

## References

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