

Professional Upgrading: The case of primary school teachers in the Pacific region

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Introduction

In the last three decades or so, several distinguished academics and observers of education have expressed their dissatisfaction with regard to the quality of teachers serving in the island states of the Pacific (Hindson, 1988; Stewart, 1975; Davis, 1978). Dr Thomas Davis, who was the then Premier of the Cook Islands, shared the view of what he saw as a threat to the quality of education in the region due to various matters of neglect of which teacher quality was one. He pinpointed this emerging problem thus:

... any watering down of standards can only be to our disadvantage. Too many of the new nations of the world have allowed the very real pressures of finance, staffing, and even political expediency, to reduce the quality of education of their people... But if we drop standards it will take a generation or more to lift our heads up again (Davis, 1978: 72).

The views expressed by Davis are supported by others (for example, Hargreaves & Lo, 2000; Hawes & Stephens, 1990; World Bank, 1990) who demonstrate that, without well-prepared teachers, it is not really possible to raise the standard of education. The contribution well-prepared teachers can make on both individuals and society is envisioned by Delors (1996: 141): "Teachers have a crucial role to play in preparing young people not only to face the future with confidence but also to build it with purpose and responsibility".

Teachers are recognized as an important group of catalysts in the development of a sustainable quality of education. Investment, therefore, made in the professional preparation of teachers, especially for the primary schools, will help lay a better foundation for subsequent formal learning. It is at the primary level that "children develop their basic attitudes and approaches to learning" (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991:18). However, when the "child's first teacher is poorly trained and poorly motivated, the very foundations on which all subsequent learning will be built will be unsound" (Delors, 1996:146).

Thus, teachers are a critical factor in the provision of quality education and consequently their professional preparation both initial and in-service warrants great attention. Research indicates that there is positive correlation between length of preparation and performance at work (Avalos, 1991; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991). In the subsequent section I shall focus on the professional preparation of primary teachers in the small islands states of the Pacific.

Initial Teacher Preparation

Initial professional preparation of primary teachers in the region is mostly carried out in the teachers' colleges. Also most of the teachers colleges offer a two-year pre-service program and award their graduates with a Certificate. In recent years, some of these colleges (those in Samoa, Tonga and Kiribati) have extended the pre-service program by another year. Others have maintained their two-year pre-service

program: the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, the Vanuatu Teachers' College and the Lautoka Teachers' College, which supplies the bulk of teachers needed for primary schools in Fiji.

The fact that teachers are constantly called on to produce better results, teach a broad range of student ability and background, teach large classes or multiple classes, and use different teaching strategies calls for a lengthening of the initial preparation of teachers. A two-year program is insufficient to adequately prepare teachers to cope with the full range of professional work and responsibilities demanded of them. The extension of the training period is also necessitated by educational reforms taking place, such as the introduction of new subjects in the school curriculum. This view is supported by many educators. For example, Hallack (1990:178) states that: "Teacher training today can no longer be limited to a two or three year course of study prior to entering the profession."

This has been recognised in Australia. The Queensland Board of Registration (1999) found, on the basis of ongoing reviews, that demands faced by teacher education in adequately preparing teachers for their challenging roles can no longer be met in a pre-service program of less than four years' duration. On the basis of such findings, most of the Australian states have extended the duration of their pre-service teacher education program until it is now a four-year programme. England also had primary teacher education programmes of two years' duration, which were extended first to three years and then to a four-year programme.

With regard to pre-service teacher education

in Papua New Guinea, MacNamara (1988) recommended the need to extend the duration from two to three years and award the graduates with a diploma. This eventually took place in the early 1990s. The rationale for these reforms were to prepare teachers for the diverse commitments of work in the field. Evidence is thus clear that the long tradition of a two-year programme is no longer sufficient to prepare teachers to cope with teachers' world of work.

Introduction of Bachelor of Education (Primary)

The short duration of a pre-service programme has an impact on the quality of teachers. This was recognised by the University of the South Pacific (USP) when it introduced a degree programme for primary teachers in the Pacific Island Countries.

To help in the professional upgrading of primary teachers and, in turn, to raise the quality of basic education, the USP took the initiative to introduce an in-service Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree in 1999. Actually, a proposal to offer this degree was first made in the early 1990s (Jenkins, 1993). As aptly stated by Jenkins (1992:20), the programme is specifically designed to offer a graduate qualification to primary teachers "rather than treating a degree as a ticket for the secondary sector". Hitherto, primary teachers from the region had limited opportunities to pursue further studies in their area. Most of them switched to other programs of study to pursue better qualifications such as Bachelor of Education (Secondary) and upon completion joined secondary education system – a gain for the secondary sector but a loss for the primary sector.

The Bachelor of Education (Primary) in-service is a two-year programme and applicants

are required to fulfil the following admission criteria:

- § A primary teacher training qualifications from a teachers training college in the region,
- § at least three years of satisfactory primary teaching experience, and
- § a letter of recommendation from the head teacher of the school where the applicant has taught.

On the basis of the above criteria, a large number of teachers qualify to undertake the program. At present, three courses, which form part of the programme, are available through distance education. These are LL114 *English for Academic Purposes*, ED255 *Introduction to Curriculum Development* and ED252 *Education Psychology and the Teaching-Learning Process*.

All 100 level courses except LL114 are cross-credited from their previous primary teacher training qualifications. As a consequence, in-service teachers are admitted into Year 2 of the programme. At the moment, a blanket approach is used in cross-crediting the 100 level courses. The rest of the courses and the semester in which they are offered are shown below.

Bachelor of Education (Primary)

Year 2 Semester One: 3 courses

- ED 215 Language and Mathematics II
- ED 255 Introduction to Curriculum Development
- ED 282 Integrated Arts II **OR**
- ED 284 Physical and Leisure Education

Semester Two: 3 courses

- ED 217 Literacy Processes
- ED 216 Science and Social Studies II
- ED 252 Educational Psychology & the Learning and Teaching Process

Year 3 Semester One: 4 courses

- ED 300 Practicum (not a taught course)
- ED 317 Special Topic in Primary Curriculum
- ED 334 Values in Education
- ED 355 Curriculum Development

Semester Two: 3 courses

- ED 319 Professional Issues in Primary Curriculum
- ED 318 Language and Mathematics III
- ED 316 Science and Social Studies III

(Source: School of Humanities Handbook, 2001.)

In addition, to the taught courses, in-service teachers are also required to successfully complete two rounds of practice teaching, which forms part of the ED300 Practicum.

Since the inception of the programme, a number of primary teachers from Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji, have upgraded their professional qualifications. It is envisaged that more primary teachers will take advantage of this programme and help contribute positively to raise the quality of basic education. The professional upgrading of teachers makes an enormous difference to their professional practice.

The USP has made a move in the right direction. What is now needed is for the teachers' colleges that still offer only a two-year programme to consider extending this to three or even four years. A combined effort from all those concerned with primary teacher training will lead to a significant improvement in the quality of basic education in the region.

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