
Partnership in Teacher Education: Some Experiences from the Fiji College of Advanced Education

Unaisi Nabobo

Introduction

This article attempts to record some reflections of collaborative attempts in teacher education between the Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE) lecturers and the teachers in the schools in Fiji.

Collaboration - Defined

Collaboration in teacher education as defined by Clift and Say (1988) is "the joint effort of university faculty members and practitioners to design and provide opportunities to improve teaching and professional education" (In Tenove 1992: 489). In collaboration, we are bridging or linking closely the thinking and activities of teacher educators, teachers in schools and student teachers. Collaboration also implies the according of equal status to both teachers in the schools and college or university teacher educators. Tikunoff, Ward and Griffen (1979) argue that those participating in a collaborative programme.

"should work with parity assuming equal responsibility to identify, inquire into and resolve their problems and concerns. Such collaboration recognises and utilises the unique skills and insights provided by each participant while demanding that no one set of responsibilities or parties is assigned superior status" (In Tenove S., 1992: 489).

Campbell (1992) on a slightly different note suggested that when we talk of linking the two potential collaborators, that is, the university or college lecturers and teachers in schools, we are implying that there are two different sides which are unconnected and which need to be connected. She further maintained that the theory and practice gap was a false dichotomy and that we cannot separate the two.

The Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE) was engaged in a Teacher Education Project

between 1992 and 1995, which was then continued by the Government of Fiji. In both phases, the FCAE facilitated collaboration between teacher educators and teachers in the schools.

Practicums: The Common Ground

As in most other teacher education institutions, the FCAE comes into a collaborative partnership with schools only during Practicums. This is when School Principals, School Coordinators of Practicums and teachers become involved in the training of student teachers. While the School Coordinators and Principals only oversee the smooth running of the practicum programmes, the teachers who are "associate" to the students play a significant role in moulding student teachers' lives. The importance of this collaborative network in the college is emphasised in the College's 1996 Practicum Handbook.

Lu (1992) speaking of the importance of collaborative programmes said that such programmes improved the effectiveness of practicums. He noted further that in order to improve the quality of practicums, the interrelationship among the teacher educators, school teachers and student teachers, needed to be improved. Baba (1997) emphasised the same when he talked about the importance of improving the relationship or partnership between University teacher educators and school teachers in the Fiji context. It is important to note, however, that this partnership will depend largely on what we expect of the practicum and how we assign the partners equal status.

In the FCAE situation, the whole idea of collaboration or partnership usually became an issue only in practicum documents, as well as spoken of on numerous occasions by Education lecturers when they conducted pre-Practicum workshops in schools. In practice, the "partners in schools" have very little to suggest or gain from the whole exercise. What took place in the practicum period is designed by College Lecturers, who in the Project period (1992-95) comprised largely the Australian consultants and their local Fiji counterparts. It was only in 1996,

at the end of the project period, with the initiation of the first practicum handbook by 'locals', that some views of school teachers (associate teachers) were taken into consideration.

The Associate Teacher

Among other roles, the Associate Teachers are expected to:

- demonstrate good teaching to students
- assist the students in the planning, teaching and evaluating of their lessons, and
- assess student-teachers' performances for the purposes of reporting to the College.

Over the years, associate teachers (ATs) have been on the agenda of practicum evaluations in the FCAE. ATs range from those who care to those who were not very interested in the whole exercise. What seemed to be a constant pattern also was the difference in reception by the teachers in schools outside Suva and those from the larger Suva area. Teachers from outside Suva, in Western Viti Levu, and in Labasa, appeared to be more accommodating and happier in receiving and "looking after" student teachers during the Practicum periods. Those from Suva generally appeared to "mind" the extra load and did not show the same enthusiasm. While this lack of enthusiasm could be explained in numerous ways, including a lack of incentives received from the practicum, work overload and the extra workload Suva teachers get from the USP run practicums, no research has been done by the FCAE to substantiate these claims.

This lack of enthusiasm by school teachers has also been noted in the USP's practicum programme. Bacchus (1997:6) stated:

"A number of schools did not seem to welcome students for their teaching practice and therefore teacher trainees often felt that they were regarded as "intruders" or individuals who are only being tolerated by the school"

Benefits to Associate Teachers (ATs)

For some time, ATs in Fiji have been performing their tasks in the name of duty and perhaps some altruistic considerations. As the FCAE grew in

years, ATs, through pre-practicum workshops began to ask for incentives or some form of reward for the part they played in the practicums. This was highlighted for example in the Practicum reviews of 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1996. Attempts by College Lecturers in 1994-1995 to get the Ministry of Education (MOE) to issue commendation letters to ATs, as a form of recognition for the part they play in the practicum, failed. The College, then, in 1996 drafted its own letters to thank as well as recognise "in print", school teachers' unpaid contributions during practicum.

One other concern of ATs is the need to upgrade their qualifications. This is an important consideration in the whole collaborative exercise as ATs play a crucial role in ensuring that theories student teachers learnt in the college were put into practice. Over the years, College students have also expressed how difficult it was to try and include some innovative approaches to teaching they learnt at the College during practicums. There is in some cases the difficulty of ATs being so set in their ways that it was not always easy for student teachers to try out innovative ideas in the classrooms. The other common problem is to do with the lack of resources in schools to implement new ideas. Large class sizes in some schools also made certain strategies difficult to try out.

Galton (1996:2) observed that:

"novice teachers tend to model themselves on their school mentor with whom they gain their first school experience. At the same time, these more experienced mentors tend to operate in a conservative manner.

... Each new generation of entrants to the profession is therefore, included into this conservative mode, despite the best efforts of tutors in training institutions."

Bacchus (1997:6 and 7) highlighted the same for the USP:

"students also observed that some of the teachers who currently worked as 'associates'

helping with the supervision of teaching practice were themselves not quite up to date in the teaching approaches which they used and hence were not as helpful as they could be."

There have been efforts by some schools over the years, since the FCAE began in 1992, to use visiting college lecturers, particularly during the pre-practicum workshops, to run seminars on various topics such as teaching skills and teacher professionalism for their teachers.

Bacchus (1997) referred to this retraining exercise as the re-professionalisation of teachers and added that there was a disregard of such continuous professional developments. Galton (1996:4) observed the same, when over-viewing teacher training systems in Europe said:

"... most systems .. follow a static conception of initial teacher education and disregard the need for the continuous professional development of teacher following their training..."

On the other hand, it has been argued by some local educationists that re-professionalisation of teachers was not a priority in third world countries like Fiji. The priority is seen to be in the initial training of teachers.

Conclusion

The practicum is a triad, a relationship between college lecturers, school teachers and student teachers. In the triad, each, has a role to play. The two "coaches" i.e. the college lecturers and ATs need to collaborate better. For the FCAE, this partnership may need to be re-examined.

Increasingly school teachers are expected to help guide student teachers to be reflective during practicums. This is in accordance with works such as that by Schon (1983) on reflective teaching. One of the college's practicum expectations of student-teachers for instance, is to keep a "reflective diary". This means mentors will need to assist them; they will only assist if they are familiar with such a notion. For much of the time, however, the trend has been for ATs to engage themselves in teaching 'skills of the trade' to student teachers. This notion of

practicum is supported by Gilliss (1987) who pushed the idea that practicum programmes should focus on the mastering of basic skills by students and that reflective teaching should be developed later in a teacher's career.

Such contradictions between College expectations and school practice could be minimised if seminars on such issues were jointly organised and attended by the two parties in this collaborative exercise. The reality, however, points to an exercise that was determined from the teacher education institution. This fails to recognise invaluable skills and insights which school teachers have. Making better or greater use of such talents will surely enhance the pre-service teacher education process. This could also be regarded as a way of moving further towards true collaboration in teacher education.

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