In Search Of Excellence in Education:
Qualitative Improvements In Primary
Schools in Fiji*

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I will attempt first to look at the concept of quality in schooling, second
to examine the factors that determine quality, third to discuss in some
detail some of these factors and finally to explore ways in which quality
can be enhanced in the context of the Fiji education system.

The 1969 Fiji Royal Education Commission\(^1\) commented that the rapid
expansion of education had not been matched by a comparative
improvement in quality. The Commission had in mind the expansion
that was going on in the 50s and the 60s when there was a tremendous
increase in the number of schools and the demand for schooling. The
Commission members were unaware that the expansion in education in
the decade following independence would be even greater than that of
the 50s and 60s and that their comments about the need for
maintenance of quality would even be more acute.

Today Fiji is well into its second decade of independence and the period
of rapid growth and expansion has passed. The country is entering a
period of consolidation in education and the scene is ideally set for
increased attention to qualitative improvements.

Our school population has stabilised: there are enough schools and
school places, at least at the primary level, enough primary teachers and
teacher training facilities to meet current needs, and we are adequately
placed to meet new demands and to improve the quality of our schools.

**Quality**

The concept of quality as it applies to a school is the extent to which the
school is able to contribute to the fullest development of the learner,
which includes the development of his mind, his body and his attitudes.

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  Head Teachers' Association on 19 October, 1984 at Nasinu Teachers' College.
Qualitative change therefore is concerned with the improvements in content, manner (or method) and the overall environment of learning and teaching, in order to bring about desired changes.

Three major factors play a part in the development of quality in a school, namely, school-related factors (including teachers, curriculum, facilities/resources), professional support and community support. I wish to discuss each of these in turn.

School-related factors

The most important of the so-called school-related or institutional factors is the teacher. Dr C E Beeby in his seminal work *The Quality of Education in Developing Countries* underlines the importance of the teacher in determining the quality of education rendered. In particular, he stresses the importance of the preparation of the teacher, which he sees as consisting of two essential components: his general education and his professional training. Beeby argues that if a teacher is ill-educated and ill-trained, his teaching is devoid of meaning and he emphasises rote learning; when the teacher becomes well-educated and well-trained he teaches more meaningfully.

The other two school-related factors, the curriculum and facilities/resources, are also important, but their effectiveness depends largely on the quality of the teacher who controls and manages their operation and use. The quality of the curriculum cannot exceed the quality of the teacher who puts it into effect. A beautifully written and packaged curriculum in the hands of a poorly trained or poorly educated teacher cannot achieve its full intention. In the same way, sophisticated facilities, be they computers, science laboratories or equipment, cannot achieve their full impact if left in the hands of an unimaginative teacher.

This highlights the importance of improving the quality of teachers in any attempt to improve the quality of education. There are at least two ways of doing this: continuous in-service training for those already in the profession, and raising the educational qualifications of those entering the profession to a level which is commensurate with the demands made on them.

I would like to deal with the latter first. It is the practice of most developing countries, including Fiji, to allow their least qualified
teachers to teach at the lowest levels of the education ladder — the kindergarten and primary schools — and the highest qualified people to teach at the top end — the senior secondary level. This practice reflects the emphasis on the teaching of subject matter required for external examinations, as compared to the attention given to the laying down of basic learning and social skills and attitudes, which are given much emphasis in kindergartens and primary schools. The above practice ignores the fact that it is at the lower end of the education hierarchy that children are at their most impressionable, and that their development in later years depends very much on the education at this level. It therefore makes good sense to require the most qualified, the best trained and educated of our teachers to teach at the primary level and be remunerated accordingly.

There is increasing recognition in many countries of this point and gradually specialist graduate teachers have been required to teach at the primary level.

The need to improve the quality of teachers through provision of continuous in-service training for those already in the profession has received some recognition fortunately. However, this service is still to be utilised widely by teachers. Among the reasons given for this situation are the difficulties relating to replacing teachers who wish to attend in-service courses and the non-involvement of teachers and their representatives in decisions relating to the courses and programmes intended for their upgrading which are provided for them by the Ministry of Education. At least two problems arise as a result of this. First, the teachers do not identify with, nor are they committed to, the courses if they are not involved with decisions about them. Two, there is the risk that the courses provided do not address the practical problems the teachers face in their classrooms.

In addition, full utilisation of in-service courses by teachers cannot come about unless the teachers determine in a major way not only the curriculum they teach but also the professional decisions that go hand in hand with it. Given such responsibility, they will see it as their job to develop or revise the curriculum of their school, and to update themselves in order that they are able to carry out their responsibilities. This would require some decentralization of administration and control in education. The decentralization of control may take time but it is a move that needs to be encouraged and deliberately planned for. The parents and members of the community are becoming conscious of their
rights with regard to the education of their children and they will insist on having greater control, not only in the running of their schools, but also in the selection of teachers and the curriculum of the schools in their district. Changes towards greater local control of schools are being brought about in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.3

With regard to the difficulties of the replacement of teachers who wish to attend in-service courses, it should be possible to provide for a small number of surplus teachers in each division who could replace teachers who are away on short courses, or who are absent or on leave for limited periods. This should be possible given the steady student enrolment and the availability of trained teachers.

Teachers must be encouraged to regard as their responsibility the need to continually upgrade themselves, and it is important that they do not feel guilty if they have to leave their classes to attend such in-service courses.

There could not be a more opportune moment to upgrade the teachers than at the present. The under-utilised facilities of Nasinu Teachers' College could be put to good use throughout the year. The Lautoka Teachers' College Certificate programme could even be upgraded to diploma level in association with the University of the South Pacific.4 This could be achieved without much delay. As indicated earlier, we should continue to upgrade the qualifications of teachers to the point where teaching becomes a graduate profession.

Professional support

One of the main difficulties in a highly centralised education system is the infrequency of visits to rural and outer island schools by educational advisors. These visits are vital to the professional development of teachers. The quality of the advice given is also critical and such advice, if it is to be useful, needs to be given by highly professional people.

The Fiji Royal Education Commission stressed that such advisors should be professionally competent and that they should be experienced and able to deal with matters as they arise. In many rural situations, the teacher has no professional support apart from that provided by the advisors and this highlights the crucial role of advisors, given the geographical scatter and inaccessibility of many of our outer island...
It may not be possible for an advisor to solve all the problems in a school but he can refer those matters he is not able to handle to others who can deal with them. Perhaps the 'mobile team' approach, where a team of advisors comprising specialists in different fields could visit together and stay for some time at each school, may be more beneficial to the teacher than having the advisors visit separately. Each division could have on its staff a full complement of advisors for such a purpose.

The advisors should not only advise teachers; they should also advise those who formulate education policies on the needs of schools so that these policies are sensitive to local problems and peculiarities. At present, education advisors are not held in high regard as they are seen to be inspectors for the Ministry of Education who push the Ministry’s policies. Until it can be seen that they also have a role in ensuring that the views of teachers, parents and community are incorporated into policies, they will continue to be regarded as outside agents. This is particularly true in the light of the accusations by the teachers that they had not been consulted on some recent major education policies such as the volunteer scheme and the 'forced integration' of teachers.

Community support

The school cannot be divorced from the community from which it draws its students. Many of the school facilities are provided by the parents and the various voluntary agencies of society. Without such support, advice and guidance, the teachers would have a difficult task.

Teachers need to be aware not only of the problems but also of the possibilities in the local community and to try to relate their teaching to their surroundings. This should lead to more meaningful learning. There are people in the community who are able to contribute to the teaching of certain skills or the local cultures and such people need to be encouraged to have an input in the school. Ways must be found to make those people feel they have a vital part to play and that their efforts are recognised.

Professional input in education policies

When policies are determined, it is important to ensure that professional
input by educationists and teachers is recognised. There is a danger in
developing countries of giving too much visibility and prominence to
politicians in these matters. As a result, policies are politicised and this
can alienate the teaching profession and undermine its neutrality. This
calls for able professional administrators at the top who need to ensure
that policies are based on sound professional advice. This must ensure
also that various forums for consultation involving parents and teachers
are kept open and utilised at all times.

Conclusion

The quality of a school depends on a number of factors — those that
relate to the school, those that relate to the community, and
professional support, including professional leadership through which
policies are formulated and implemented. If these factors are given due
recognition, we have every reason to be confident of the quality of the
education we provide our children at least at the primary level.

Notes

   Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
   Change in Melanesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and
   R.R. Premdas and J.S. Steeves (1985) Solomon Islands: An Experiment in
   Decentralisation. Honolulu: Centre for Asian and Pacific Studies,
   University of Hawaii.
4. At least three teachers' colleges in the South Pacific have adopted this
   approach and they award diplomas "in association" with the University
   of the South Pacific.
5. About 67 percent of all schools in Fiji are located outside the boundaries of
   the nine towns and cities. See T.L. Baba (1979) An Evaluation of the
   UNDP Social Science Curriculum in Fiji Secondary Schools. Unpublis-
6. These led to the first national teachers’ strike (28 February to 12 March,
   1985) and a protest march in Suva in October, 1984.