

Pedagogical Preparation of Pre-service Primary School Teachers: The Challenges of the Professional Experience in Fiji

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Victor Mafone Alasa^{1*}, Fabiano Tikoinavuso², Taraivini Raiula³, Feroz Ali⁴

^{1,2,3,4}School of Education, Fiji National University, Lautoka, Fiji

Corresponding Email: *victor.alasa@fnu.ac.fj

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Abstract

In many countries where funding for education has been directed at improving access, the redirection towards funding of quality education has been slow. In Fiji, studies have found that symptoms of the lack of funding for quality education include: large class sizes in urban areas; multi-grade classes in rural areas; low levels of qualifications in the teaching force; teachers' general frustration with curriculum development; and the pressures of external examination systems as asystemmatic. In this context, the pressures on individual teachers are high, while support for them and for the schools they serve is low. An aspect that was discussed of the result of this ongoing pressure is the impact on pre-service teachers who become part of these school communities for their field experience (or practicum). This paper reports on the frustrations and disappointments expressed by one group of pre-service teachers as they reflect on their practicum experiences in schools in Fiji qualitative research design and data gathered were content analyzed. The findings shed light on the difficulties faced by all teachers in Fiji. Recommendations include not only supporting pre-service teachers during their practicum, but also supporting the teachers in the field whose responsibility for preparing the new generation of teachers is sometimes taken for granted.

Keywords: Practicum, Teaching Practice, Field Experience, Pre-service Teachers, Fiji

INTRODUCTION

The preparation of quality teachers who will deliver quality education in teacher education institutions is an important national discourse in capacity development in a concerted effort towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This emphasis, according to Yoshida and van der Walt (2018), superseded a drive towards equitable access (Yoshida & van der Walt, 2018). The education of teachers who are appropriately and adequately incentivised, professionally qualified in pedagogical matters and versatile in both instructional delivery issues are key for robust, quality classroom instructional delivery, that culminate to what has come to be a description of the concept of quality education- specifically entailing issues +such as appropriate skills development, gender parity, provision of relevant school infrastructure, equipment, educational materials and resources, scholarships or teaching force.

Crossley, Koya-Vaka'uta, Lagi, McGrath, Helu-Thaman & Waqailiti (2017), in their report on the state of Fiji education in 2015/2016 academic year; reported large class sizes in urban areas, multi-grade classes in rural areas, low levels of qualification in the teaching force, teachers' general frustration with curriculum development and reforms, and the pressures of

external examination systems as the challenges of the sector. In the Fiji context, teachers have often come under undue negative scrutiny by the populace as a result of the influx of social media as described by Alhamadan, Al-Saadi, Baroutsis, Du Plessis, Hamid, & Honan (2014). There is also gradually a general decline of the once dignified historical and cultural perceptions towards teachers. Teachers are an easy target for the tensions inherent in 21st century post-industrial society still coming to terms with the dynamics of independence from colonial authorities.

It is therefore justified to point out that the pressures on individual teachers are high in Fiji, while support for them and for the schools they serve is relatively low. Infrastructure that is common in schools located in the global North is either scarce or non-existent (air-conditioning, well-stocked libraries, computer facilities, and others). The impact of these challenges on pre-service students during the teaching mentorship through the professional practicum exercise has become a frequent subject at many educational discourse. In this paper, we proffered solutions to the several challenges, frustrations and disappointments expressed by one group of pre-service student-teachers as they reflected on their practicum experiences in schools in Fiji.

The student-teachers' professional experience or practicum is regarded as a key component in a teacher education notwithstanding the varied aims of this field experience from context to context (Wilson, 2006). The practicum is an exercise that attempts to reconcile the restraints of educational contexts with advocated practices and theories. Beck & Kosnik (2002) argue that the objective is to provide pre-service teachers with authentic hands-on experience. They explain this is needed to develop their teaching skills and to start a collection of experiences in teaching to enrich professional wisdom. However, the plethora of challenges could dissuade or diminish the essence of this significant exercise. These authors express fear that such challenges if not handle sooner could become a demobilizing factors for student-teachers who might go through this process and be confronted with these myriad of obstacles and ending up leaving the profession. As grounded as this fear may be, A public university in Fiji in this study, one of the provider of teacher education and training in Fiji, have engaged our pre-service student in professional development on the premise that a sound and solid professional preparation is a necessary tool for success in teaching, and that practicum is a fundamental component of this preparation.

The professional experience component of initial teacher education has attracted a lot of attention over the years. Educators in different contexts as well as stakeholders in different education sectors have raised their concerns about the importance of teaching practice (Cook-Sather, 2010). Judging from how significant this process of development is and how

stakeholders affirmed its relevance in translating educational theories to practices in contexts that are exact mirror of trainee-teachers' would-be realities, it is valuable to consider the dispositions of these pre-service teachers on matters that concerns their preparation process vis-a-vis their experiences in the practicum process. Van Wyh (2012) argues that for some pre-service teachers, teaching practice is a sharp learning curve which is incomparable to simulated classroom situations while for others it is a platform for establishing effective learning relationship leading to the development of the professional self.

Researchers like Nilsson & Van Driel (2010) believe that engagement in professional experience contributes enormously to the formation of pre-service teachers. Practicum is also an opportunity for pre-service teachers to apply the principles of cutting-edge curriculum design, lesson planning, and teaching pedagogy, assessment and evaluation into practice in real life classroom scenarios. Marais & Meier (2004) assert that teaching practice represents the range of experiences to which pre-service teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and school. They further argued that as challenging as this process, it is an important part of teacher training.

A public university in Fiji in this study has two major practicum engagements during the three years of studies in the Bachelor of Education (Primary). The first phase of practicum engagement is done in the programme's First Year, when pre-service teachers undertaking the Primary education degree are sent out for fourteen weeks of teaching experience. This first engagement is normally referred to as Home Based Experience whereby they go back to a primary school close to their home for their first practicum. During this engagement, pre-service teachers are required to teach lower Primary (Year 1- 4). The second phase of practicum engagement takes place in Year Two, which is also for fourteen weeks of teaching practice when pre-service teachers are asked to teach upper classes (Year 5-8).

During both practicums, a public university in Fiji in this study appoint external Supervisors / Assessors who are sent out to visit and assess pre-service teachers on two occasions. The Supervisors observe each pre-service teacher and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their classroom delivery. In schools, the pre-service teachers are assigned to Associate Teachers. The Associate Teachers, amongst others, are expected to carry out the following tasks:

1. Attend to briefings and workshops organized by the practicum coordinator.
2. Give daily feedback, support and guidance to Pre-service Teachers on their teaching and professional practice.

3. Check thoroughly and endorse all of the pre-service teacher's lesson plans and programmes a week prior to any teaching. Endorse pre-service teacher's attendance record on a weekly basis.

To ensure a quality outcome of this process, the Head Teacher, Assistant Head Teachers, Associate Teachers, Executive Teachers, Managers of the School and Stakeholders are tasked to take responsibility for the pre-service teachers. Before pre-service teachers are sent out to their placement schools, they are instructed of their obligations during their 14 weeks of practicum engagement. They are required to strive to expand their professional knowledge so that they can foster a sound understanding on how things are done in schools; the school protocols, the teaching programs and also their duties and responsibilities to the students as a whole.

METHOD

The 22 participants for this case study were randomly sampled from the 120 year two pre-service students who had just returned from their fourteen weeks of teaching practicum engagement in various schools Fiji in 2019. Their age group range from 19- 25 years. The participant had expressed their willingness to be part of this research study as they were also made aware of the aim of the exercise. All respondents gave their informed consent to participate in the study and were also allowed to freely withdraw from the study should they become uncomfortable with the process.

The study was underpinned by the qualitative approach, with the use of the talanoa as both research method for data collection, especially within the Pacific context. The talanoa session is a method that is embedded in an existing cultural practice of the Pacific people. As an oratory tradition, talanoa is a concept recognized in Fiji and some other Pacific countries (Prescott, 2008). It has been defined by Vaioleti (2006), as an open, informal conversation between people in which they share their stories, thoughts and feelings. Consequently, the participants were led into a discourse that centred on questions that highlighted the challenges and teaching/learning outcomes from the 14 weeks of professional development engagement. The following two research questions guided the talanoa session:

1. What are your perceptions about your teaching practicum engagement and experiences?
2. How can a public university in Fiji in this study improve their strategy in teaching practicum exercise delivery from your experience during the last teaching practice?

The recorded voice data from the talanoa session with the respondents were transcribed into textual data for qualitative data analysis. The raw data was categorised using the grounded theory (inductive approach).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the result of this study, perspectives of the respondents quite resonate with Ferrie-Kerr (2009) and Lu (2010) who found that although majority of the trainee teachers often find field experience effective and helpful, a few find it but challenging and problematic. Highlighted below are the varied challenges categorizations, that year 2 pre-service teachers at Fiji National University, Lautoka Campus, experienced while on their 14 weeks of practicum engagement.

Emotional challenges

The respondents expressed feelings of guilt, responsibility, disappointment, relief, frustration, sympathy, anxiety and satisfaction when they reflected on their experiences during the teaching practicum in schools. Of course, these feelings varied in intensity for each individual who were posted to different schools and districts throughout Fiji. Examples of such expressions of emotional challenges undergirding this professional development exercise are the like of Respondents 2 who opined that:

This practicum was an experience for me. I was anxious at first and my anxiety soon transition into fear and frustrations, I was able to adjust after the first 3 weeks and completing it was a huge relief. That is not to say I did not learn from this process. My Associate teacher was a stabilizing factor for me. I will certainly be more confident at the next opportunity.

On the other hand, Respondent 4 succinctly expressed disappointments as his expectation were not actualized. He said:

My experience was that of disappointment as I did not receive the support of my Associate teacher, who almost abandoned me from day one without the mentoring process required. I had to figure most things out myself or inquired of other colleagues.

Unlike R.13's response, she remarked that "...it was a feeling of satisfaction and a major accomplishment of a professional hurdle crossed...that was a milestone in my quest for teacher education and preparation." The feelings were mutually exclusive but everyone has a fascinating story to tell about the exercise.

These emotional outbursts lend credence to the fact that teaching is a complex endeavour (Beattie; 1995; Mander,1997) and that it is emotionally charged (Leary, 2000). Hargreaves (1998) asserts that emotions are at the heart of teaching and good teaching is charged with positive emotion. Jeffery and Wood (1996) describe teacher's guilt, fear, anguish, despair, depression, humiliation and grief as emotions produced by a mismatch between expectations and what is experienced in the school system.

The challenge of resources

In our bid at a public university in Fiji in this study to mitigate the resources challenges, we make provision of some educational resources for our pre-service teachers proceeding to teaching practicum. These materials include 1 red and 1 blue pen, 1 red and 1 blue whiteboard markers, 1 newsprint roll, 1 brown paper roll, one ream of A4 paper, 2 reams of foolscap paper, 2 exercise books, 1 teachers' workbook and a daily attendance register. Despite this support, when this question of resources was raised with the respondents, there was a 100% agreement that it was one of the prevalent challenges faced during the exercise. For example, Respondent 1, 5, 7, 11, 16 and 21 agreed and opined that:

We pay more than a thousand dollars for this practicum unit alone and this is a huge amount indeed. However, the resources that we were supplied with to assist us in our teaching practice lasted only for a week or two. Most of the time we have to spend our very own money to purchase the teaching resources we needed so that the learning needs of the students can be met. We are scared to ask teachers because some of the teachers are also purchasing from their own pocket.

Respondent 2 even explained this further

I had used my all my teaching resources after the end of week three. I went into the office to do some photocopying. I grabbed a ream of A4 paper which was just beside the photo copying machine and guess what; to my surprise I was told off by the office girls not to dare touch or use those reams of papers. I was disturbed and belittled by what I heard as I was also told to purchase my own resources if I run out of mine.

This lack of/or inadequacies of resources as expressed by these respondents heightened the frustrations of these student-teachers and definitely had a direct impact on the teaching/learning process. This finding is in line with Offenheiser & Holcombe's (2003) assertion that the availability and utilization of resources contribute to effective classroom teaching. The lack of teaching resources can negatively create an unsustainable learning environment that will impact on academic performance. According to Kasim (2008) instructional resources are vital in the acquisition of knowledge and skills of learners. Gatherie (2012) notes that structural resources and materials if used efficiently and actively facilitate the learning process in the classroom.

Effective instructional delivery is guaranteed with the availability of teaching materials and these resources provide viable support for students' learning and also increase students' academic success. From the study, pre-service teachers were frustrated by the absence of teaching resources and were often told that they need to purchase their own. This can kill the momentum and the spirit of enthusiasm in pre-service teachers. Resources play a pivotal role

in education and pre-service teachers really had a hard time in trying to amend their teaching when there were no resources. This affects the implementation of the curriculum negatively as the creation of an unsustainable learning environment affects the children improving their academic performance (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). According to Kasim (2008) instructional resources are vital in the acquisition of knowledge, concept and skills. Guthrie (2012) equally notes that instructional materials if used efficiently and actively can facilitate learning processes in the classroom.

Unmitigated Interruptions

Another area that has caused a lot of workload pressure for pre-service teachers is interruptions to schedules. According to the respondents there were three major areas of interruptions: incessant staff meetings, visitors' arrivals; and medical visits. Teacher's use of professional time has been examined by several authors. It is well known that teachers spend long hours at work (Moore-Johnson, 1990; Hargreaves.1992 & 1994). Although for most teachers a majority of their time is spent directly with their students, the working time outside the classroom is a considerable proportion of the working day (Hargreaves 1994; Harvey & Spinney, 2000). This latter part of teachers' working time, the invisible work (Nordanger and Per Lindqvist, 2002) has contributed significantly to the intensification of the job of teaching. Seventy-two percent of the respondents mentioned that too much time that was supposed to be utilized in contact hours with the students were wasted. We all know that meetings can create a demand on teacher's time. As general rule most teachers accept meetings as a necessary aspect of their job. However, holding meetings during time that is supposed to be part of student contact time is common in Fiji.

The most common concern expressed about meetings was that there are too many and they are usually held on the very first day of the week when teachers are trying to get their class settled and charting the pace for a week-long educational experience of teaching and learning. For example, R.2 said:

Every Monday out of the fourteen weeks of my practicum engagement is the most tiring day of the week. This is so because our meeting would start from 8am and would last sometimes for one hour to one hour and a half; and for goodness sake our students contact time is being compromised. This is nothing else but poor leadership and poor management style.

Visitors to the school and into classrooms are another interruption that our pre-service teachers had to deal with during their practicum engagement. Fiji is heavily reliant on tourism as an income source, and part of the "authentic" tourist experience (White, 2007) promoted by cruise ship companies and resorts is a visit to a local school. Schools are usually in a difficult

position in trying to balance the value of resources provided by tourists who visit their schools with the time it takes to prepare for these visits. As R.19 observed:

Isn't one whole day of traditional preparation and performance of traditional dance a waste of time? From a trainee teacher's perspective...it is totally and utterly a waste of time. Time spent on this are borrowed time of the students whom we are supposed to be teaching. This had been the school's tradition over few decades because they get financial supports from tourists coming over to their school. They donate resources to the school. Therefore, as long as you support these school functions and ceaseless activities, you are in the managerial good books. I figured it was going to be a hard nut to crack if anyone, not even a student-teacher, wants to go against school traditions.

R.4 added:

This same group came to the school two years ago where the student performed traditional "meke." It seems that they have built on a solid relationship as they have donated money for the sake of upgrading the schools with resources as such. Very good, appreciate the assistance. However, for the school and the students' sake we have wasted quality time in the rehearsal part and the performance part because sometimes rehearsal can be done for five days after lunch for one week simply to await their coming. This is totally a big loss in terms of syllabi coverage. This would certainly affect our classroom delivery.

Workload ambiguity

Workload ambiguity is a recurring theme in the pre-service teachers' responses. About 70% of the respondents experienced workload ambiguity in their practicum experience. Workload ambiguity in its simplest definition would be when the workload that trainee teachers were assigned during teaching practicum is greater than anticipated. Since trainee teachers were not qualified as teachers yet at this stage, the workload created a role ambiguity. Some of the workload experienced by trainee teachers included teaching while unsupervised, absent colleagues, extra-curricular activities e.g. sport coaching, scout camping. This all added to their workload.

Pre-service teachers were often being given a class with no mentor because they have gone on leave. The work that is supposed to be carried out by the Mentor is now carried by the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers' then experience emotional exhaustion while on their practicum engagement. The outcomes of this abnormal situation are a higher dimension of stress resulting from work-related burn-out and this culminate in low productivity, withdrawal, negative attitudes and low self-esteem.

To be regarded as replacement teacher and not as a teacher trainee was one of the disturbing experiences explained by R.10.

I was shocked on my very first day at school when I was introduced to the Head Teacher's class and was given full control of his class from day one...everything about his class was under my full control...teaching, preparing exam papers, marking student books marking exam paper, entering marks in the log book, school patrol... everything! I saw myself not as students-teacher but a replacement teacher instead.

Although the Associate Teachers are expected to be saddled with the responsibility mentoring the trainee teachers in all the facets of the teaching experience. Unlike the experiences of most respondents in this study whereby this all important role was abandoned and were thrown into the realities of teachings without the necessary guidance and assistance. It is noteworthy to state that preservice teachers can be given extra responsibility due to colleagues being absent. For example, R.7 said:

I vividly recall my first Monday in school when I was introduced and welcomed during the school assembly. I was honoured to be part of existing team. However, everything turned out sour when I was escorted by the Assistant Head Teacher to year 2 classroom only to be told by her that the year 2 teachers had gone on maternity leave three days prior to my arrival to school. Gosh!!!! was the unspoken word I said to myself. She must be joking.

I was assigned to facilitate years one and two. My associate teachers had gone on maternity leave for three months. I was alone. I didn't know where to start. I was lost. I had thirteen Year one students and fifteen year two students. First three days to four, it was singing songs and rhymes at the same time I was trying to map out my pathways towards multigrade teaching. To be honest I had shared tears while trying to deal with multigrade teaching...I retorted to myself constantly that I was doing a great dis-service to these students because I have no experience of multigrade classroom teaching.

As Crossley et al (2017) reported Fiji has many multigrades Primary School across the country. From its humble inception, multigrade schools were set up as a matter of necessity in rural remote areas where the number of children enrolled could not meet the required number to organize a single grade. Another contributing factor too is the shortage of funds for teachers or the lack of physical resources such as building to cater for straight classes. However, for our pre-service teachers who have no experience at all of multigrade

teaching it may mean more preparation of curriculum learning and materials. He /she may be required to do more careful study of the learner's developmental characteristics across the age levels involved in the class, approaches and strategies that are effective and viable within a multigrade setting. One of the pre-service teachers (R.8) explained how difficult

I was assigned to facilitate years one and two. My associate teachers had gone on maternity leave for three months. I was alone. I just don't know where to start. I was lost. I had thirteen Year one students and fifteen Year two students. First three days to four it was singing songs and rhymes at the same time I was trying to map out my pathways towards multigrade teaching. To be honest I had shared tears while trying to deal with multigrade teaching. Oh my gosh... I am doing injustice the students because I have no experience of multigrade classroom teaching.

Relational difficulties with Associate Teachers

One of the most expressed difficulties experienced by pre-service trainee teachers was the lack of communication from their Associate Teachers. Lack of feedbacks, poor communication and unhealthy relationships with the associate teachers were experienced. The importance of this was underscored by La Bosky & Rickert (2002) and Zeichner (2002) who mooted that pre-service students simply want "to survive" in the classroom and to receive positive assessment of their own teaching from their associate full-time teacher. They also need the full support and a practicum environment in which they feel safe and are able to take risks. A good Associate Teacher plays a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of practicum environment. Pre-service teachers are often faced with a lot of frustrations when they realised that their Associate Teachers are not assisting them. This causes difficulties in their efforts to implement the curriculum. In support of this, Graham (2006) claims that the quality of communication and shared understanding between the pre-service teachers and mentors seems to be the main criteria for a successful practicum experience.

The role of an Associate Teacher is crucial in teacher education because they mould pre-service teachers through continual feedbacks and collaborations. (Sinclair, Dowson & Thistleton, 2006) believed that Associate Teachers have a role in shaping future teachers. Glen (2006) revealed the balance of control, existence of personal relationship, provision of constructive feedback and the ability to accept differences were important aspects for both pre-service teachers and associative teacher.

Student teachers who have no associate teachers or mentors spend long hours of preparation during and after school hours. Due to teachers being absent, the countless number of supervisions and the amount of preparation that needs to be done in a classroom without

any mentor, the pre-service teachers are faced with stressful situations that negatively impacts on how to they cope with the demand of their practicum engagement.

CONCLUSION

It is quite obvious from the findings analysed above that teaching practicum for pre-service students in Fiji is inundated with several challenges, which varied from schools to schools depending on the geographical locations. From the literature and the findings, it is equally clear that the classroom environment in which the trainee-teacher spends his or her entire practicum is a very important element for success. The significance of leveraging this professional development opportunity for pedagogical enquiries, developing best practices skill-set, and operationalizing novel teaching ideological imperatives came through from the responses of the participants in this study, hence authenticating the importance of teaching practicum.

Nonetheless, if the challenges enumerated are not addressed adequately and appropriately, there is the possibility of it becoming a de-motivating conduit for professional entrants. A negative worldview into the teaching profession could be interpreted or funnelled through a 14 weeks of calamitous professional exercise. This becomes the defining narrative of what ought to be a robust professional life in a world of teaching. Unfortunately, these challenges described by these pre-service teachers tend to overwhelm any positive emotions they had about their experiences.

The following recommendations are proffered for a successful teaching professional experience in Fiji teacher education programme. There is a constant need for consultations and collaborations to be strengthened between the Ministries of Education all the Pacific and the teacher training institutions so that future practicums can be done with the actualization of the desired outcomes. Continuous professional development should be offered to placement schools. Various Practicum Coordinator should prepare continuous awareness programmes for School Heads, and School Teachers (Associate Teachers) about the implementation and the expectation of the practicum exercise and Associate Teachers (Mentors) should thoroughly and continuously support, follow up and assess pre-service teachers through the provision of appropriate results based on their performance. Only experience teachers should be given Mentorship role, especially those with more than a decade of professional experience. The encouragement of internal assessors over external assessors. That is to say that institutions should use more of their Lecturers to assess trainee teachers during practicum, and the Ministries of Education should make budgetary provision for resources that can be used by trainee teachers during practicum for their professional development. Also, teacher training institutions should increase the quantity of the teaching materials and resources given to the

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