

## **Participants' perceptions of the goals of the practicum in a teacher education program**

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### **Abstract**

*The university of the South Pacific plays a major role in facilitating the development of teachers to work in schools through out the South Pacific. This paper examines teacher educators' perceptions of the attributes of an effective teacher in order to provide a framework to examine the implementation of practicum program in the Bachelor of Education (Secondary). The paper argues that there is a need to change the focus of the practicum from an apprenticeship to model based on reflective practice. Facilitating the development of reflective practitioners should increase the likelihood of more appropriate teaching practices in schools.*

### **Introduction**

Compare these two comments about teachers in the South Pacific.

*"the teacher is a role-model who engendered among his/her pupils, the knowledge, skills and qualities that a society considered to be so important that their transmission cannot be left to chance."*

*Teachers overemphasis passing exams*

*The teachers' power and authority characterises their relationships with the students.*

*Teaching is teacher-centered and didactic resulting in monotonous boring lessons.*

*Teachers blame students for their lack of motivation."*

(Veramu, 1999)

The first reflects an indigenous view of the role of a teacher in Pacific Island societies, the second although 10 years old is unfortunately a description of a reality in many schools and many classrooms throughout the region. There are many factors, which contribute these problems and these have been clearly articulated by many other educators (Thaman, 1993, Taufe'ulungaki, 1999). In this paper I want to consider how practicum component of the Bachelor of Education degree at The University of the South Pacific, a major education trainer in the South Pacific, may contribute to problem and also its solution.

This paper is a work in progress and is part of a project to examine participants' perceptions of the role of the practicum in teacher education. I will begin by identifying what participants identified as an effective teacher, and then I will consider the structure of Education degrees at the University of the South Pacific and the role the practicum in the secondary teacher training. Following this I will discuss, the constraints on the practicum and then highlight how changing the nature and the purpose of the practicum could contribute to improved education outcomes for students in the region.

I want to acknowledge at the outset, that there are indeed many wonderful, dedicated and exciting teachers in schools throughout the Pacific. This paper should in no way be taken as a criticism of their work. Nor do I want to suggest that the academic staff at the University of the South Pacific (USP) are to blame for the problems that have been identified in schools within Fiji. The purpose of this paper is rather to reflect on the issues associated with the implementation of the practicum component of the Bachelor Education degree at USP.

### ***Attributes of an effective teacher***

In order to determine what role the practicum should play in the development of an effective teacher, it is first necessary to determine what participants perceive are the attributes of an effective teacher. The participants' responses suggest there are five general categories of attributes of an effective teacher. The first, category recognises the teacher as an important member of a social group. All of the respondents (academics, members of school executives and teachers) indicated that the effective teachers were significant people in the school and the community. Thus, they had social responsibility, which included their role as a leader in their communities, a role –model for others, and a supporter and organiser of others.

In this category, the co-operating (associate) teachers spoke of their roles as role models for the beginning teachers. School executives indicated they saw their role as providing guidance so that beginning teachers were trained to display the appropriate behaviour in their professional roles as teachers. For example one of the school principals commented that he felt that his role was to instil the proper behaviour so that it became routine behaviour for the teachers. For this principal instilling proper behaviour included monitoring the student teachers' dress, so that at his school one of student teachers was sent home on the first day because her arms were uncovered and her dress was too short.

Included in this category is the view that effective teachers act as a catalyst providing leadership within the school. Illustrating this one of the academic staff members, UN, said

*" A good teacher would give a bit more, not only of their time but also help out in terms of resources, like not expect the school or the principal to buy everything. For example a good teacher maybe can organise other teachers to buy newspapers for the school library and organise a teacher-resource part of the library so that the children can benefit".*

The teachers' relationships with other members of the school community are the third aspect of category. Thus, PU commented

*"The first thing is that they must value the ethics of the school. If they value the ethics of the school only then will they be able to function in that school. And then they must be able to work with others, work as a team, [because] anywhere in the world even, not only in Fiji".*

Similarly, AK commented

*"A teacher must get some kind of rapport, if teaching in the community you must have a kind of rapport with the teachers in the school. You must get to know other teachers. Some schools I have been in they have cliques. It is very dangerous to have cliques in school. .. It is very unhealthy because that can also go into the classroom... and the children are watching"*

The second category of attributes of an effective teacher also considers a social dimension, but this time, the quality of the relationship between the teacher's and his/her students. A clearly defining attribute is the teacher who had personal knowledge and personal relationship with his/her students. This is shown in comments like:

*GT: A good teacher, first they should attempt to know the students well, their background and then they should be able to relate to them in a similar manner.*

*AK: "Before you start any class you must know where the student comes from because the students bring a lot of things from home to the classroom and they reflect the home in the classroom. ... I did that when I was teaching at SV High School because I was new and I did not know the school's predominately Indian students. So at recess time I use to interview the students at least on a formal basis. I asked them where they came from. ... [The group who runs the school means that there is a perception that all the children are wealthy]*

*After informal discussion, some of them came from farming background from areas around the Nadi Town. I was teaching these Form 3 students who were really slow.... So when I teach them I understand where they were coming from. I knew how far they were travelling. So in fact I intruded into their world"*

*UN: First of all, knows the children, what they brought with them into the classroom in terms of knowledge, in terms of students' backgrounds in terms of – everything to do with their learning, at least some idea so that when they see the child .. the teacher would have some idea. This kids had come from this such and such a background, this kid comes from a squatter settlement, this kid has rich parents, etc.*

While similar sentiments about personal knowledge and care about the students are expressed by teachers in Australia, classes in schools in the South Pacific could typically contain at least forty and commonly fifty students. The expectation that effective teachers know about and have a personal relationship with all the students they teach, places a large burden on the teachers.

This leads to the third category of attributes of effective teachers, an affective component. In many schools where there is a scarcity of funding, lack of resources and isolation from ongoing professional support and further training. Thus, most of the academic staff indicated that during their training teachers needed to be or at least needed to become self-motivated in order to be effective teachers.

*BD: [Speaking about education students' motivation]I want to be a teacher and I'm interested in being a teacher and also to be a teacher, prepare to learn new things. It's good to prepare to learn new things". ...[Rather than comments like]*

*"Oh well, I become a teacher I'm not going to do anymore things and you know, I've got the scheme of work done." It's need to be just like lecturers in USP wanting to learn new things, do research here and there, I think they need to learn and I think they need to be self-motivated..*

AK: *" Must continue to learn because it shows that we don't have it all, we don't have all the answers". "continue your professional development and then you maximise your potential".*

Further, teachers need to be able to cope with the stress of the job in difficult and demanding circumstances

AK: *"A teacher must be well prepared .. when I mean prepared it means psychologically, emotionally and intellectually because sometimes basing from my own experience when I have a bad mood I come home and it affects my teaching, You see some teachers they come home and some of the teachers had a fight with their spouse and they come and they put it on the children. Leave all that because the children don't know anything about what you have been through. You cannot take your headache into them."*

AS: *"sometimes teachers come and they are so groggy that they put off the students, the whole day is spoilt..."*

BD: *"I think that's another important characteristics if you want a teacher to be self-motivated and if you are not motivated I don't think people from outside can motivate you. We can motivate little children to do things but adult teacher you have to be self-motivated. Apart from that attitude, is also very important. Personally for me, I think presentation of self as well. Presentation of self is very important. I think children are able to read whether you are a committed teacher, whether you are a brisk teacher, whether you are a good teacher, you know, how well you are prepared, I think presentation of self is very important. If you walk into a classroom, if you know you don't present yourself well, and you look groggy and drowsy and tired, children are able to read it. You know we are not living [like] 30, 40 years back where the teacher was not seen, we hardly look into the teacher's face, now children look at the teacher, you know, they want to communicate, they want to interact."*

Fourth, there was a group of attributes in the pedagogical skill category, where the participants spoke of about effective teachers motivating and engaging students in learning. To exemplify the attributes in this category compare these two comments by UN who was describing the performance of two student teachers, a very good one and a very poor student.

UN: *"It was just literature come alive. I don't think the students wanted the class to end. ... I guess it was a combination of preparation, teacher personality and knowledge of the subject."*

*"I remember nearly screaming during the class. He was a combination of quietness, probably couldn't open his mouth, anyway he was too conscious of himself and I thought he taught too much from the book. He was trying to teach about the world war or something. .. He could have asked them "Have you got relics from the war around you village? There is a lot in Guadalcanal, but he taught from the textbook and remote from the children's life. And I thought if I were the students, I would have been killed. ...I could see the kids were so bored. In the Solomons where they can pretend to be kind, they just can't pretend anymore."*

Similarly, one of the school principals spoke about effective teachers having rooms, which hummed with students who were actively engaged in learning.

Finally, there was, of course, the teachers' knowledge of their subject area and the knowledge of the curriculum. UN, has already indicated this category in her comment describing the performance of a very good student teacher, but it is more clearly articulated by PU:

*"Another thing the teacher must be familiar with the subject content, the curriculum expectations of the school, the ministry of education and the community."*

From these comments, it appears that the people who are involved in the training of new teachers have a holistic view of teachers. The teacher is a member of a community, both within the school and within society. They have a significant role to play fostering the development of the students at the school. They are expected to work in a demanding challenging environment where there is often a shortage of resources, large classes and a highly prescriptive syllabus. Finally the Departments of Education judge their performance by their students' performance in the formal examination system. Despite all these obstacles, many staff at USP remain optimistic that new graduates will bolster the group of committed enthusiastic and committed teachers working throughout the Pacific. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that this rarely occurs.

As the practicum is the major component of the course where students are inducted into the profession, it seems appropriate to examine ways this component can be structured to better facilitate more appropriate professional practice. In order to do this I will begin by describing the structure of the Education degrees at USP and the organisation of the practicum. Then I will identify what the participants perceive to be the purpose of the practicum. Following this I will discuss the constraints on implementing the practicum, before suggesting why one possible model of improving the practicum.

#### ***Details of courses and students enrolled in B.Ed. (Secondary)***

The majority of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) are enrolled in the pre-service course. In this course they major in a subject in their teaching area as well as in Education. This degree is their only teaching qualification. There is a small, but significant, number of in-service teachers who are studying for a Bachelor of Education degree in order to upgrade their qualifications. These students may have complete initial teacher training at one of the Teacher Colleges throughout the region, usually in their own country, while others may have received their teacher training 'on the job' with this being supplemented by short in-service courses which provide them with a Teaching Certificate. While most in-service teachers receive cross-credit for the first year Education subjects, they follow an almost identical program for the subsequent two years of their degrees. Thus, in a cohort of about 300 – 400 students, some have no teaching experience having recently completed high school, some have limited teaching experience of around 3-5 years, while others may be very experienced teachers with over 10 years experience.

The practicum component of the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) consists of a total of twelve weeks, incorporating four blocks each of three weeks duration. Students complete 2 blocks of practicum in each of the second and third years of their study. The first block, conducted at the beginning of their second year before the students have been given any formal instruction in teaching methods is expected to be mainly observational, with the university indicating that students should teach a maximum of 2 lessons per week. Students complete one formal course in teaching methodology before their remaining second, third and fourth blocks of practice teaching. Their final unit of curriculum studies is completed at the end of their third year. These details in the organisation of the units in the course are shown in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Organisation of the Practicum in BEd (Secondary)**

Year in BEd	Pre-semester 1	Semester 1	Mid- semester	Semester 2
2	Block 1 – 3 week home based school experience	Teaching Methodology course 1  Curriculum content area & micro-teaching workshop	Block 2 – 3 weeks USP based School experience	-
3	Block 3  – 3 week home based school experience		Block 4  – 3 weeks USP based School experience	Teaching Methodology course 2  Curriculum content area

***Expectation of the role of the practicum***

There appears to be four broad categories of expected outcomes of the practicum. Examination of the university's practicum handbook suggests that the university's official perception of the purpose of the practicum is a time when the students develop the practical component of their pedagogical skills as well as developing their understanding of the relationships between theory and practice. This is exemplified in statements from the handbook like

*"put into practice the important ideas/values and innovative teaching –learning methodologies they have learning in the micro-teaching and subject workshops"* (Handbook Block 2)

Academic staff supports this role of the practicum, as a time for students to develop and refine their practical skills. For example comments from, AS and UN;

AS: *"... we'd like them to go and try out some of the things they learn here. That's why it's not in microteaching , but in 30 or 40 minutes lessons. That opportunity should be provided for them to go and try out and see what goes right and what goes wrong"*

and

UN: *"I'm hoping that it would be a time when students put to practice what we teach them"*

Other comments suggest that the practicum should provide the students with an opportunity to enrich their pedagogical knowledge.

AK *"In education there is the abstract and there is the practicum and these two are related, and again you get the feel of the abstract from the practicum. I think it is important, part of*

*the education particularly for teachers, that there is in-depth practicum in their training so that they can go out and see for themselves, just go out and see whether what they learnt in the classroom is related to the real world."*

Similarly UN commented

UN: *".. it'll be a time when they'll try and marry the two –learn from it if you like, the expression in the field and may be get the benefit of both, put to practise what we teach from the university or college and at the same time learn from the practitioner."*

Thus the Development of Practical Skills, and the Enrichment of Pedagogical knowledge appear to be two of the broad categories of expected outcomes from the practicum. There is some indication that the practicum should also provide the opportunity for students to develop their Philosophy of Teaching as they become Members of the Teaching profession. In the practicum handbook the purpose of the fourth block of the practicum is

*"students reflect further on the practice and theory on education based on the pedagogy they have studied"*

which, suggests some component of the development of a personal philosophy of teaching. In this light, BI comments

BI: *"But, I think practicum is important and we need to make students realise the broader aims of practicum. I think currently what is happening when you talk about practicum people just think – going and sit in the classroom, observing somebody teach and teaching the lesson. Teaching some of the lessons, you know, that's how it's seen but practicum has a broader indication than just going some place. .... I think, it provides the children time to reflect, adjust and make some adjustment to their own lives I think. That's how I see the practicum."*

The enculturation into the teaching profession is also implied in the practicum handbook where in the directions to the associate (cooperating) teachers, it indicates

*" Student teachers should be recognised as young people learning to become professional people"*

This view of the practicum where the student becomes a member of the profession appears to be salient for the associate (cooperating) teachers.

T2: *"...they [student teachers] are taught in isolation, away from the classroom, so when they are put into a school environment it is not only the students they are interacting with, it is the whole institution. The whole school climate and like, yes the whole culture ..."*

Although this teacher suggests that the practicum as providing a positive enculturation for the student teachers, this rarely occurs. Typically students either put on "show lessons" for the visiting academic staff or copy the worst practice of their associate teachers. One of the academic staff, UN, summed up these observations.

UN: *"out of the research I have done in the past, the child is lost in the world of the practitioner and if they finally go and join they forget everything we ever teach from the institution. They go back to the raft and become part of it. They become part of this"*

*established practice whether the established practice is good or not, they just copy and emulate what the current practitioners are doing."*

Unfortunately, often what are copied are poor techniques as PU commented,

*"Some students follow what their associate teacher do, most students ..[Commenting on a student she had observed] so I sat in this class for 35-40 minutes and he was only dictating notes. I said [after the class] this is not a lesson, you teach a concept. I said dictation is not a lesson. He said, that's what the associate teacher does. So the associate teacher is not aware, she thinks that way. The associate teacher teaches that way the student should do the same".*

This failure of the practicum experience, where students fail to integrate techniques or reflect on issues discussed at university with the practical experience in the school, leads to the obvious question "why does this occur?". I want to suggest constraints imposed on the personnel involved and the nature of the practicum which lead to this result for the majority of the students.

### ***Constraints on personnel involved in the practicum***

USP is a university supported by and working within developing countries. These conditions impose severe constraints on the personnel facilitating the students' learning in the practicum.

Although in theory academic staff should observe students teaching for at least two lessons, in practice often students are only seen once by a member of staff from USP. The main reason for this constraint is that each academic staff could typically supervise up to 30 students in one block of the practicum. This means there is often only time to observe the student teacher teaching one lesson within each block in the practicum. Observing a student teacher during one thirty-minute lesson is of course insufficient time to provide effective support and direction. Thus, the major role in supporting and assessing the development of the student teacher falls on the associate (co-operating) teachers, and finally, the school Principal. Although there is an expectation that the associate teachers will provide this on-going support and direction, there are four factors, which hinder their effectiveness.

The low level of skill among some of the associate teachers is the first of these factors, as there still remains a significant number of untrained teachers throughout the South Pacific. In Fiji, about 24% of the secondary teachers are untrained; Tonga –33%; Solomon Islands: 34%; Samoa: 39%, and Kiribati: 40% (Thaman, 1999). While some of these teachers are inherently great teachers many of them are inappropriate role models for the students. Illustrating this problem is a comment by PU,

*PU: "Most of the time I think the associate teachers themselves don't know what they are doing because they are not trained themselves. We have a lot of associate teachers that have no teacher-training, so then what they do is give book knowledge to the students."*

Many of the student teachers could be assigned to schools where their associate (co-operating) teacher is untrained or has limited teaching experience. In some schools in rural areas, the student teacher might have higher level of training in their subject area than the teachers at the school. Sometimes at the beginning of the year (i.e. in Blocks 1 and 3) the student teacher would be expected to take on a full teaching load as the full-time staff members have not been appointed to the school. So rather than having an opportunity to develop their skills under supervision or support from a trained associate teacher, many students are working without sufficient direction or support.

While USP certainly expected the associate teachers to be actively involved in helping the student teacher, the associate teachers appeared to be unsure of their role. While they appeared to be happy acting as a role model, they were less certain of their role in giving feedback and directions.

T2 [speaking about having a student in the room] *"We try to follow all the rules. Give the introduction, etc.."*

... *"Sometimes we don't know how far to go, how to relay to the student and when do we step in... when do we actually relay to them that this is how you do it, this is where you should use more varieties."*

T4: *Otherwise on our own it's a routine thing, but now we know there is somebody there in the classroom and you know they are trying to learn from us so we are extra careful.*

The associate teachers may be undermining the strategies and skills taught at USP. In the interviews where one of the teachers is discussing the role of the practicum there is some indication that she believes that teaching strategies, such as group work, are difficult to achieve in the classroom.

T1: *"I think they'd be able to put the theory into practice and they come to know the real situation. Sometimes I believe [ideas from] USP we are not able to put in the classroom that well. For example we teach here very big numbers 58, 59 students so every time the group work .. it is very hard to get group work in classrooms with large numbers like that. These are the things we come to know when we/they are really in the classroom situations"*.

So while USP promotes group work as an effective teaching strategy for engaging students in learning, at least some of the associate teachers are not promoting its use.

Finally, teachers at the schools may not have sufficient time to support the student teachers during the practicum. USP and the other major teaching training college in Fiji, Fiji College of Advanced Education, share a common timing for the second and third block of the practicum. Thus schools could be asked to supervise more trainee teachers than they can effectively support. This problem is illustrated by one of the deputy principals VP1:

VP1: *"The middle of the year is an overlap with the Fiji College of Advanced Education lot so they don't really get all that attention because we are sort of overloaded with trainee teachers and that is a problem. ...What happens is sometimes we will use the same associate teacher for Fiji College student as well as for the USP student and so .. the teacher is busy. Fiji College has several reports that we fill in. The teacher is busy doing reports and all that and I don't think they really make such thorough observations, they don't go through lessons."*

### ***A Direction for change***

Given these constraints on the implementation of the practicum, the pervading culture of teacher centred lessons and a didactic approach to teaching is unlikely to change. This suggests that there needs to be a fundamental shift in teacher education, so that students become more actively involved in constructing their professional knowledge. One possible direction for change comes from Schom's (1983, 1987) and other's work (Beattie, 1997; Clarke, 1995; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Shulman 1987, 1992; Smith, 1999, 1991) on the impact of teachers' reflection on facilitating change in their professional practice. At the moment the teacher education program at USP appears to be based on a codified set of behaviors. This is exemplified by the microteaching workshops, which form a significant part

of the Teaching Methodology course in the second year of the education degree, and the assessment procedures the academic staff and the associate teachers are expected to complete following their observations of the student teachers' lessons. This model fails to recognise that effective teaching is highly context dependent and predicated on the teacher's interpretation and reactions to each situation. Facilitating the development of students' ability to reflect on their actions should assist them to direct their own practice, inform their practice and transform their practice.

When student teachers engage in reflective practice during their practicum, Clarke, (1995) has shown that they reconceptualise their view of teaching from changes from a didactic to focusing on engaging students in learning, and begin to develop their own philosophy and style of teaching. These reconceptualisations resulted in changes in the students teaching strategies and approach to classroom management. This suggests, that assisting students teachers to engage in critical reflection on their teaching and the teaching they observe in the schools will indeed fulfil USP aim to enhance the quality of Education offered in schools throughout the Pacific. If, teachers are engaged in the process of critical reflect, then they are more likely to take an active role in developing appropriate teaching strategies in the classroom. Further they are more likely to recognise their responsibilities and fulfil their roles as an important member of society. Reflective teachers would indeed display the attributes of an effective teacher. They would be a role-model in their communities, that is people who is able to engender among their pupils, the knowledge, skills and qualities that their societies considers to be so important that their transmission cannot be left to chance, rather than the current situation where too many classrooms are dominated by unmotivated conveyors of monotonous boring lessons, which bear little relevance for the students or their communities.

While there is a significant body of research indicating the benefits of assisting teachers to engage in critical reflective, at least one question remains: "how can a teacher training institution like USP develop a culture of reflective practice amongst teachers who live in hierarchical societies, which do traditionally accept questioning or criticism of the prevailing practices?". Thaman's (1998) metaphor of kakala, which includes the concepts of the importance of knowledge, skills and values where learning is motivated by respect and love for fellow learners may provide a philosophical basis for this reflection. The mechanisms through which student teachers are supported and encouraged to engage in this reflection, however, still remain unclear.

#### Reference:

Veramu J. (1999) From college graduate to practising teacher. Pacific Curriculum Network 8(1) 24-27