

Research Article

Preparing teachers for rural schools: An empirical evidence from a Fiji case

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the pre-service training program of a teacher education institution in Fiji to determine whether it equipped beginning teachers for work in rural schools. Data for the study was gathered by means of interviews with key people in the case study institution and beginning teachers posted to a rural school. Also, analysis of documents such as, the College Handbook was carried out to gather information needed for the study. Analysis of the data showed that a course entitled DPE230, an enrichment activity known as Rural Homestay together with rural teaching practice were the innovations introduced to cater for the preparation of pre-service teachers for work in rural schools. The College staff felt the innovations introduced in the pre-service program had a positive impact in the preparation of teachers' for work in rural schools. Likewise, the analysis of the feedback obtained from the beginning teachers clearly indicated that they were satisfied with their preparation as they adjusted themselves well to work and life in the rural school. The present study relating to pre-service training of teachers for teachers' world of work is useful as it has implications also to higher education institutions within and outside Fiji to prepare teachers to meet the challenges of rural work and life.

Keywords: Rural schools, multi-class teaching, teacher education, pre-service program, innovation

Introduction

Teachers with little knowledge and skills of teaching in rural contexts, are likely to adversely impact the education of rural children who are already at risk. For effective teaching practices in rural schools, teachers need adequate professional preparation during their initial teacher education program and also ongoing education and training whilst they are in service. As often highlighted, teachers with good professional preparation are a catalyst not only for the provision of quality education for all children but also in terms of national development (Chandra, 1994; UNESCO, 1995). The notion of having a high quality primary education as a prerequisite to attain secondary and tertiary education is professionally sound (Griffith, 1995; Lockheed & Vespoor, 1991). This is because all initiatives in educational development and provision, hinges on the availability of quality teachers with suitable pedagogical skills, knowledge and characteristics (Burnett & Lingam, 2007).

Thus a teacher's ability to meet the challenges and responsibilities of myriad work responsibilities depends to a large extent on their professional preparation. Both the theoretical and practical components of the training program need to be compatible with the work expected of teachers in schools such as those located in rural settings. In light of this, the need for research on the professional preparation of teachers at the pre-service level for teaching in rural schools is therefore obvious.

Background

In most educational contexts there is a lack of a common and explicit definition of the term 'rural' (Baills & Rossi, 2001). Generally, the three key characteristics of rural schools are isolation, distance and smallness (Bray, 1987; Hopkin, 1972). Both Bray and Hopkin who have experience working in the Pacific, share the view that although small schools are common they vary in many ways. However, one common factor highlighted by various researchers about rural schools is their remoteness from main centres and this poses a lot of challenges to teachers (Bray, 1987; Hopkin, 1972).

One way to cope with these challenges is for teacher education programs to adequately prepare teachers for work in rural schools. Unfortunately for the Pacific region, the research literature demonstrates inadequate preparation of teachers for work in rural schools (Ali, 2004; Lingam, 2004; Muralidhar, 1989; Thaman, 1989). Likewise, studies in some overseas contexts such in Queensland, Australia showed a minimal preparation of teachers for work in rural schools and in some cases was non-existent (Yarrow, Hershell & Millwater, 1991). In an earlier study, Watson (1988) found similar results for New South Wales and Western Australia. The literature demonstrates that teaching in rural settings ostensibly require relevant knowledge and skills to cope with various eventualities and challenges (Field, 2001).

Due to their remoteness these schools differ greatly from those in urban areas such as in terms of children's learning outcomes. Rural schools do not perform as well as urban schools. A contributing factor could be the quality of teachers posted to teach in rural schools (Bauch, 2001; Modh & Landstrom, 1996). Added to this, is that such schools are hardly visited by educational advisers and this further contributes towards poor teacher performance (Baba, 1985; Weeks, 1994). To make matters worse well-qualified teachers prefer to teach in urban schools (Tuimavana, 2010; Burnett & Lingam, 2007; Learning Together, 2000).

One of the more obvious educational characteristics of rural schools is the multi-class teaching arrangements especially in the Pacific region (Collingwood, 1991). This is the norm in primary schools located in rural and remote locations in most Pacific Island countries. Due to population distribution, which is sparse in nature, these rural schools tend to have small student populations. Looking at the statistics on multi-class teaching provided by Collingwood (1991) for some Pacific island countries including Fiji, the need for teacher preparation for multi-class teaching is warranted.

Findings of numerous research studies in the local and international contexts have shown that the multi-class teaching situations pose a lot of difficulties for teachers especially those who have not undergone any professional preparation on it (Ali, 2004; Dorovolomo, 2004; Little, 2001; Theobald & Howley, 1998). In the Fiji context, the consultants for Basic Education Management Teacher Upgrading Project (BEMTUP), Singh and Booth (1997) raised concern about the lack of preparation for multi-class teaching. Likewise, the findings of other studies (Booth, Wilson, Lingam & Singh, 2000; Jenkins & Singh, 1996) also indicated the difficulties teachers face in rural contexts where multi-class teaching is the norm. A recent study conducted in the Fiji context showed that learning outcomes of rural primary children were considerably lower than their urban counterparts. In addition, teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in handling multi-class teaching could also be a contributing factor in the poor learning outcomes of rural children (Narsey, 2004).

Little (2001) suggested that for effective teaching and learning to take place in multi-class arrangements, teachers need to be well-prepared in all areas including planning for teaching and pedagogy. Generally, international literature presents a gloomy picture in terms of training programs to accommodate work in rural schools (Little, 2001). Due to professional differences associated with work in rural schools, adequate professional preparation is warranted to enable teachers to effectively work in rural settings. Apart from the educational characteristics, rural schools may pose other challenges to teachers such as the 'cultural gap' (Thaman, 2002). Thus, apart from the inclusion of multi-class components in the pre-service programme, researchers and educators have proposed a more culturally inclusive curriculum and teaching not only at the school level but also in the teacher education programmes (Learning Together, 2000; Thaman, 2000; Teasdale & Teasdale 1992; Teaero, 2002). The beginning teachers will encounter diverse cultural backgrounds of children not only in urban classrooms but also in rural classrooms and this necessitates multicultural studies in the teacher education programmes. Teachers need to be literate and sensitive to other cultures in order to cope with teaching and learning culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds of students. In line with this the Fiji Education Commission Report suggested the need to select students for teacher training who have:

...knowledge, skills and dispositions that would enable them to cope with the impact on teaching and learning of culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. An entry requirement of some degree of trilingualism, which is then developed through the teacher education programme, would be desirable.

It is envisaged that the inclusion of cultural knowledge as a criterion in the selection process and multicultural studies in the training programme will help teachers to better acclimatize themselves to life and work in rural schools.

Sub standard school facilities, and accommodation together with the poor socio-economic background of many rural communities are additional challenges highlighted in the international literature. Besides possessing relevant teaching qualifications, being aware of the realities of rural life would help a teacher to appreciate the difficult situation in rural schools and thereby use suitable practical strategies to ensure children achieve optimum learning outcomes (Eppley, 2009).

Considering these views, it is vital that pre-service and in-service teacher education programs professionally prepare teachers to work effectively not only in urban schools but also in rural schools. In this regard inclusion of

relevant aspects of rural teaching in both theoretical and practical components would better equip teachers with necessary knowledge and skills to successfully work in such difficult circumstances.

Though brief, the preceding literature describes some rather unfortunate trends relating to the supply of teachers to rural schools. The picture that emerges, then, is that teachers working in rural schools encounter a lot of difficulties as well as challenges due to lack of professional preparation. One way round the concerns as suggested in the literature is to focus on their preparation for work in rural schools. Based on this argument, it is vital to examine whether pre-service teacher education programme caters for work in rural schools.

The Fiji Context

Fiji is now formally known as the Republic of the Fiji Islands. It lies in the South Pacific and is made up of two large and several small islands with a total population of about 800,000. It covers an area of about 194,000 square kilometres. Fiji has over 300 islands and approximately 100 islands are inhabited. Most of the islands are scattered. The geographical separation and isolation of communities have also contributed to the establishment of small schools. The furthest island is Rotuma, which is about 400 kilometres away from the capital city, Suva. The map shows the geographical dispersion of the islands in Fiji, and their location in relation to other countries in the South Pacific (Figure 1).

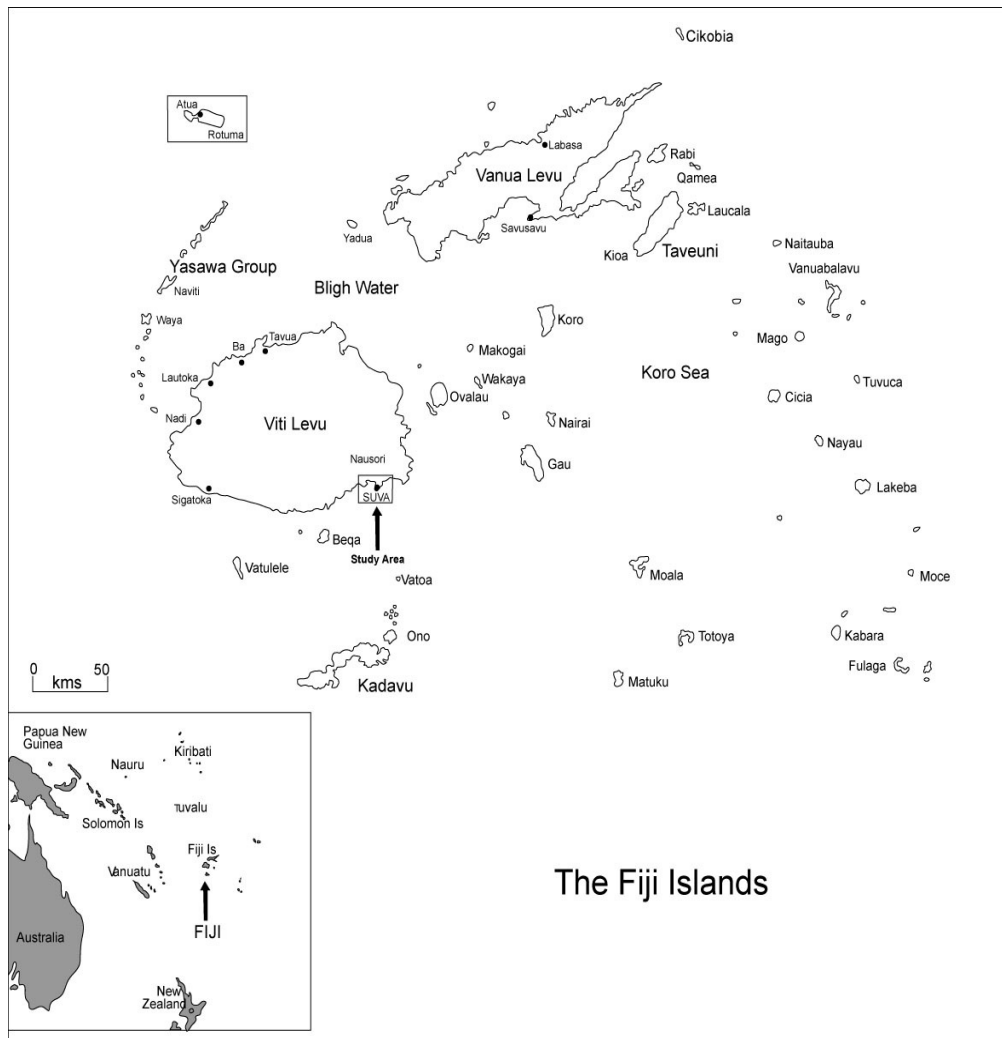


Figure 1: Geographical dispersion of the islands in Fiji, and Fiji's location in relation to other neighbouring countries in the South Pacific.

According to Bray (1992) a country with a population not exceeding 1.5 million is a small country. By this definition, Fiji is a small country and consequently with limited economic resources faces considerable difficulties to meet the competing demands of the various sectors of the economy, including education. With the current global economic recession, the nation's economy is likely to further contract. After achieving independence in 1970, there was a rising demand for schooling due to the growing economic importance attached to the education system as a source of skilled manpower (Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984). Consequently, more schools were set up in various parts of the country to provide easy access for the school-age children. As a result primary schools are found in most parts the country and some are very small with teachers as the only public servants found to be serving in remote areas.

Statistics for primary education show that there are 715 primary schools with a total student population of 142,000 and about 5000 teachers in the primary teaching service (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2006). Of the 715 primary schools, nearly 80 per cent are classified as rural schools with 38 per cent as being very remote (Tavola, 2000). According to the Ministry of Education, a rural school is one that is: 10-20 km from a town boundary, equal to or greater than 20 km from a town boundary and very remote (Learning Together, 2000). In the Fiji context, primary schools are of two types: one that runs Classes 1 to 6 and the other that runs Classes 1 to 8. In terms of school management and ownership, only two primary schools are owned and run by the government. The remaining primary schools are owned and run by non-government organizations such the religious bodies and school committees. Even though most schools are run by non-government organizations, they still operate under the co-ordination of the Ministry of Education. Similarly, education policies are formulated by the government and all schools are to observe them regardless of their ownership. With regard to the school curriculum, all schools follow a fairly uniform curriculum supplied by the Ministry of Education. The government supplies trained teachers and pays for their salaries. In addition, the government provides per capita grants to facilitate fee-free primary education. The present arrangement in the provision of primary education reflects a healthy partnership between the government and the non-government organizations.

Background of the College

Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC) is administered by the government through the Ministry of Education. It is the largest primary teacher training institution in the country and supplies the largest number of qualified teachers needed for the primary schools in Fiji. Apart from LTC, there are two other non-government run primary teacher education institutions: Fulton College and Corpus Christi Teachers' College are owned and managed by the Seventh Day Adventist Church and Catholic Church respectively. These two colleges provide teachers for schools mainly run by their denominations. For over two decades the LTC offered a two-year Certificate in Primary Teaching. More recently, the College program was upgraded to Diploma in Primary Education. The upgrading work was carried out through funding and technical assistance from the Australian Agency for International Development (LTC Handbook, 2009).

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the study was to investigate the professional preparation of teachers at the pre-service level for work in rural primary schools. The study was guided by a central research question: Is the College responsive to the professional needs of teachers and in turn the educational needs of children in rural schools? If yes, then what are the institutional initiatives to support prospective teachers for work in the rural schools?

Rationale

More and more teachers are prepared each year for primary teaching without the benefit of any informed research into their professional preparation. As such the findings of the present study could provide better insights about teacher preparation for rural education in a small developing context in the Pacific region, namely, Fiji.

Though a small-scale study, the findings may help inform the practices of those responsible for teacher education about the strengths and limitations of the training program to cope with work and life in rural settings. It is only through research findings that necessary improvements and developments in teacher education could be made. For teacher educators responsible for the Bachelor of Education in-service degree program at University of the South Pacific, the findings would help inform their professional practice, in terms of what further needs to be done to better equip future teachers with teaching in schools especially those located in rural settings. In overseas countries such as in New Zealand and Australia there is an abundance of research literature on various issues relating to rural

education. In the Fiji context, however, there has not been any in-depth research conducted on the theme of teacher preparation for rural education. In this regard the study could help contribute to the building of relevant literature in the area of rural education and pre-service teacher education.

In addition, the present study could encourage and at the same time act as a catalyst for further investigation on varying issues relating to rural education not only in Fiji but also in other developing contexts especially in the small island states of the Pacific region.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was employed for the study (Yin, 1984). In the present study the case referred to is the pre-service primary teacher education program of a teacher education institution in Fiji. A purposive sampling technique was used for the study. In accordance with the qualitative nature of the research, the data gathering methods employed were document analysis and interviews (Burns, 1996; Merriam, 1998). Apart from interviews, document analysis provided relevant and valuable information for a study. The selection of documents for the present study was guided by the research question posed. In this study the document analysed was the College Handbook. This document provided relevant information pertaining to the research question posed.

With regard to interviews, they were conducted with individuals who had direct involvement with the enterprise and in this case, the College Practicum Coordinator provided greater detail of the events and activities associated with the teacher education program especially relating to the institutions' initiatives for teacher preparation for rural schools. Apart from the College Practicum Coordinator, data were supplemented by interviews with a sample of three beginning teachers about their preparation for teaching in rural schools. In selecting the sample, the criterion adopted was a typical rural school with beginning teachers who graduated from LTC.

In selecting the sample size and the rural school, the following were considered such as the purpose of the research, convenience and viability (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). The small sample size but representative of the LTC graduates was chosen because of the physical distance of the schools where beginning teachers were posted to teach. A four wheel drive vehicle was needed to travel about 15 kilometers off the main road and over the gravel road to reach the school and in turn, the teachers. The school has a small student population of 81 with classes ranging from one to eight. Due to its small student population, the school was entitled for four teachers. As a result, the school had no other option but to provide children with education using multi-class teaching arrangement.

The interviews with the beginning teachers were tape recorded upon their consent. The interviews were later transcribed and this ensured constant reference of the data. The interviews were conversational in nature and type and they did follow a prescribed interview schedule (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The interviewees were allowed to go in the direction they wished as long as they provided data which were within the parameters of the research question posed.

Gathering data using interviews helped complement data that were obtained from consulting the relevant document. This helped to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability as well as confirmability of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1983). Several researchers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Kellehear, 1993) consider documentary evidence to provide stronger insights about the phenomenon under study, by cross-validating, corroborating and augmenting evidence gathered from other sources and in this case interviews, thus contributing to data triangulation. Before undertaking the fieldwork, informed consent of the relevant authorities such as, the Ministry of Education, the College Practicum Coordinator and the beginning teachers were sought.

The data were analysed using a low tech method, that is, manually (Vulliamy & Webb, 1992). The data which were qualitative in nature were sorted according to the themes and patterns which emerged as a result of a process of inductive categorization (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990). These were then interpreted in relation to the existing literature to answer the research question posed. The use of quotes from the interview data are presented because, as Ruddock (1993: 19) has indicated they carry "a rich density of meaning in a few words" and in this case about the pre-service teacher education program for teaching in rural schools.

Summary of findings/Discussion

The present study is about the LTC pre-service teacher education program in meeting the demands of teachers' world of work. Specifically, the study focused on the preparation of teachers at the pre-service level for work in rural schools. In this section the summary of the findings and the discussions associated with the study are presented.

Theoretical preparation

An analysis of the offerings at LTC revealed that as part of the pre-service program upgrading in 2005 to Diploma in Primary Education, a course which specifically focused on multi-class teaching was developed and implemented. The course was known as *DPE230 Facilitating Learning in the Multi-class Classroom*. Hitherto, the College did not offer student teachers any theoretical or practical preparation for work in rural schools. This demonstrates that over the years the College paid scant attention to teacher preparation for rural schools such as those with multi-class teaching arrangement. This is consistent with the international literature (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; Ramirez, 1981). The Practicum Coordinator pointed out that in the past years pre-service teachers were mostly attached to urban schools for teaching practicum. This signals that the College did not prepare pre-service teachers for teaching in rural schools as there were no rural placements for teaching practice. In this regard, the introduction and inclusion of the course in itself is a positive step towards preparing teachers for work in rural schools. The following is the handbook documentation of *DPE230* course description:

This course aims to assist students develop understandings of the principles of an outcomes approach to education, with a particular focus on application within a multi-grade setting. Students will be able to demonstrate sound planning and how to apply this in a classroom setting. This course also provides the opportunity for students to develop knowledge and skills necessary to interpret curriculum prescriptions and apply them in multi-class settings. It is hoped that students will also develop understanding of strategies and approaches related to multi-class teaching within the Fiji context (LTC Handbook, 2009: p. 53).

The description demonstrates the relevant knowledge and skills the course intends to develop in the pre-service teachers to ensure successful teaching practice in rural schools with multi-grade teaching arrangements. Some of the topics to be taught in the course include organizing the classroom, planning classroom work, developing and establishing routine teaching with groups, and peer teaching, that is, children teaching children (LTCUP, 2004). The theoretical preparations on these aspects were important in ensuring a smooth transition to work in rural schools. Moreover, beginning teachers would also become familiar with a range of teaching strategies that could be employed for effective teaching in a multi-class situation. Preparing teachers to plan and implement programs for more than one year level in a single classroom reflects the reality of primary education in Fiji (Lingam, 2004; Collingwood, 1991). During the interview the Professional Practice Coordinator divulged that “the course DPE 230 was directly linked to a six week long practicum in a rural school [with multi-class arrangement]”.

Rural Homestay

Prior to the rural practicum, the pre-service teachers were required to complete an enrichment program known as Rural Homestay (LTC Handbook, 2009). This was a compulsory enrichment activity and all pre-service teachers were expected to participate in order to satisfy the College's graduation requirements and at the same time the program equipped them for the rural practicum and life in rural settings. The program was to enable 6-8 students of different cultural, religious, and ethnic groups to stay in the Rural Homestay at the College for a week. At the College, a house typical of rural houses was built to initially expose students to rural life before the rural practicum proper began. The Coordinator stated that:

The rural home stay gave the students a chance to manage and develop themselves such as in time management, duties and responsibilities, relationships, protocols and resources management. The groups assigned to stay in the rural homestay must be a mixed group especially in terms of ethnicity. This rural home stay experience also help heal racial relationships between students of the two major races, [Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians].

The Rural Homestay was for the purpose of enabling pre-service teachers to learn rural skills, live together harmoniously, act responsibly, and also to acquire certain enterprising skills. At the Rural Homestay, the acquisition of various rural skills such as cooking on open fire, cutting, collecting and storing firewood would enable student teachers to live successfully in rural areas. With respect to learning to live together, pre-service teachers would better understand and appreciate cultural diversity by respecting each other's values and religious beliefs. In so far as learning to be responsible was concerned, pre-service teachers were required to learn to be responsible for their own safety, belongings, hygiene and studies. Learning to be enterprising gave them an opportunity to carry out some suitable activities for further improvement of the Rural Homestay such as by cultivating a vegetable garden.

The Rural Homestay was a compulsory component of the LTC enrichment program which in turn was geared towards life in rural areas. Some of the activities the pre-service teachers do included, cooking their own food, gardening, adhering to their culture and traditional protocols, and organizing social nights. A typical program for the week is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Daily activities in the Rural Homestay

Friday	Saturday/ Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Inventory check	Duties	Duties	Duties	Duties	Duties	Duties
Making duty roster	Gardening	Gardening	Gardening	Gardening	Gardening	Clean up
Preparing menu for the week	Enterprise activity	Enterprise activity	Clean up	Enterprise activity	Inventory check	Check out
Enterprise activity	Church	Clean up		Organising 'protocol night'	Clean up	
Clean up	Clean up			Clean up		

The food ration was provided by the College. The Rural Homestay provided student teachers an awareness of not only life in rural areas but also certain cultural issues pertaining to living in the rural areas.

The Professional Practice Coordinator indicated that the exposure to rural life through the Rural Homestay was useful and helpful in terms of pre-service teachers' preparation for teaching and other adjunct roles and responsibilities in rural schools. The program was useful in terms of developing the skills, understandings, knowledge, and attitudes needed for student teachers to successfully operate in rural settings. This is consistent with the views expressed by Eppley (2009) who highlighted that subject matter alone is not a sufficient to meet the unique needs of schools in rural settings. In this regard, the rural homestay added more value to the pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills about living in a rural environment.

Rural practice teaching

Apart from the theoretical preparation and the Rural Homestay, the Handbook also stipulated that pre-service teachers were provided exposure to multi-class teaching in one of the three practice teaching modules. The first practicum module was entitled DPE129 and this professional practice involved students teaching single lessons and managing a small class group. The second module was entitled DPE239 and it involved teaching multi-class groups through a number of linked lessons. The final module was known as DPE249 and this professional practice involved teaching to the learning needs of individuals and groups across whole days within school and community contexts (LTC Handbook, 2009, p. 36-37). The practice teaching modules were development oriented and built on pre-service teachers' theoretical and pedagogical knowledge.

In the first year, pre-service teachers undertake a 4 week school practicum in the second semester and they selected their schools for the practicum. During this practicum they were encouraged to observe and participate in the day to day operations of the classroom, assist the classroom teacher and at the same time reflect on their suitability and commitment to the teaching profession. All these developments for the teachers' world of work later culminated in assuming full responsibility for a class of learners for a prolonged period of up to 6 weeks practicum in semesters three and four of their final year. Students were exposed to two major teaching contexts: rural and urban with different teaching arrangements, multi-class and straight class teaching respectively.

The present arrangement for the practicum is professionally sound. The requirements for the practicum increase with complexity from practicum one to three. Also, the pre-service teachers get an opportunity to make connections of their experience of primary classrooms with knowledge and skills gained and developed from the various taught courses such as curriculum courses and education courses. Through this exposure they were expected to acquire first hand information about teachers' work and how children were engaged in the teaching and learning process over a period of time. Furthermore, pre-service teachers were supported in their practicum by visiting lecturers from the College, the associate teachers as well as by the head teachers of the host school. At the same time the Coordinator ensured that the pre-service teachers experience a range of school settings and also get

to handle the teaching and learning at different class levels. When asked about the need for the innovative initiatives, that is, the course DPE230 and the Rural Homestay the Coordinator stated:

To give students an experience that will prepare them for rural teaching experience and consequently, accepting rural postings happily upon graduation.

With respect to professional practice two, it specifically focused on preparing teachers for rural schools and pre-service teachers were placed in rural schools for teaching practice. They were provided with food ration for the six week period and at times were also expected to supplement the ration with other food items from the community and the host school (LTC Handbook, 2009). Pre-service teachers were transported to the host schools by the College. Buses and vans especially four-wheel drive vehicles were normally hired for this purpose. At least 4 to 5 students were posted to a rural school. Students were provided with cooking kits which the College has bought specifically for rural teaching practice. The College has a vehicle which was bought during the LTC Upgrade Project with funding and technical assistance from AusAID. The transport was used also by the lecturers to visit and supervise students in remote schools. Apart from the College staff, support was also sought from respective education districts for the multi-class teaching practice. During the interview, it was divulged by the Professional Practice Coordinator that they received enormous support from the host schools in terms of accommodation for student teachers. Without this kind of support such an initiative would not have been possible. For the continuation of such a worthwhile practice, a close partnership and a healthy relationship between the College and the host school needed to be maintained at all times. This rural teaching exposure was expected to enable pre-service teachers to acquire first hand information about the ground realities of schools in rural settings especially with multi-class teaching arrangements and also to gain deeper insights about life and work within this context. Such an exposure and experience would then ensure that beginning teachers have a better understanding of the situations in rural schools (Eppley, 2009). For instance, the school context, the availability of resource materials, and the social and economic background of the children and the community the school serves. Apart from work in the school and the classroom, the College required students to contribute something extra or special to host schools such as by providing music training, sports training, staff development, gardening, painting and the like. This demonstrated a two way win-win situation for both the College and the host schools. In terms of the outcome of the rural practice, the Coordinator highlighted the professional benefits accrued from the initiative:

Students have adjusted to their rural practicum without any problems [and] this is evident when we make visits to the host schools. They also established good relationship with the school staff and the community. These contributed to their personal and social development. They have learned to budget food rations and managed time wisely and meaningfully. We have seen a positive change in student's attitude towards work, life and challenges [in rural schools].

Beginning teachers' feedback

Feedback from the beginning teachers indicated that the pre-service activities associated with work in rural education were useful and helpful not only with their professional work at school but also in terms of living in a rural environment. The pre-service experience and exposure helped them considerably in a number of ways to get adjusted to rural life and school work. Some of the themes that emerged included knowledge of the local culture and language, environment, resources, and pedagogy associated with multi-class teaching.

In terms of local culture and language, the beginning teachers indicated that their understanding of and sensitivity to the cultural and language differences of other ethnic groups have helped them a lot in the new environment. For example:

At the College, the rural homestay helped us in sharing cultures, for we live in a multi-cultural society, I was able to learn the Fijian and Rotuman culture and got to taste respective dishes. In this community I am able to mix around with Fijian people...I know how to live with them...I have also learnt some new vernacular words.

Most interesting thing was that I was able to live together with four of my Indian friends and three Fijian friends as well in the rural homestay. This helped me to live in a multi-racial environment and community like the one here

I learnt some of the new things from our Fijian friends and this helped me to socialize with Fijian people.

They also claimed that the LTC training helped them in their day to day living and teaching in rural schools. For example, the following comments demonstrate this:

The College trained us and we are now used to a life of a rural based. The training gave us a great opportunity to experience rural life and now we are teaching in a rural based school, we do not face any difficulties.

We were better prepared ...when we graduated, we were posted to this rural school and we are well prepared and know how rural life is.

The training was good. It prepared us for teaching practice in rural setting. Personally, it was a good practice and a mind blowing experience. I was prepared to come and serve here.

Furthermore, beginning teachers pointed out that the rural home stay helped them to get used to living in rural settings. The following comments illustrate this:

It helped me to develop skills to use in this rural community. It also helped me to become accustomed to the rural lifestyle. I am enjoying my life here.

I was able to adjust to rural environment very easily, since I got a good experience by staying in the rural home stay and rural teaching practice.

In addition, beginning teachers' pointed out that the rural home stay and the rural practice helped them to know about the technology available in rural settings. For example:

The most interesting thing was using of olden technology (charcoal iron) to iron clothes and cooking food using the open fire. Using of kerosene lamps in the night to eat dinner. Also sleeping on the floor with only the sponge and the pillow...Now we have no problems with cooking using open fire.

We even go out to look for firewood in the jungle to cook food.

The training at the College has helped me in instilling in myself practices of a rural household... This is the first time for me to live in a house with toilet away from the main quarters.

It has helped me to prepare meals for myself and my friends. I have also learnt to adjust to washing clothes with my hands.

They also commented that they better understand about the lack of resources in rural schools. For example:

Yes the training helped me to teach in a rural school. [Teaching in rural school] is nothing new we have experienced this in our rural practice. It is seen that in rural areas limited resources are available...we know how to improvise...it won't be hard for me to manage them.

With reference to multi-grade teaching, all of them commended the initiative introduced by the LTC in providing them exposure to multi-grade teaching. For instance:

I have learnt from the experience at LTC how to teach in a multi-grade...I am used to it. It used be difficult at the beginning during the practicum but slowly through the training I have acquired relevant knowledge and skills to teach in multi-grade.

The training at LTC incorporated strategies to cope with multi-grade...I am using them so I do not find teaching difficult.

The inclusion of the DPE230 course in the Diploma program provided the beginning teachers with the theoretical understandings about the nature of work in rural schools and this was further strengthened through the rural homestay and professional practice experience. A multi-faceted approach to data analysis demonstrated that both the components contributed towards improving beginning teachers' perception, appreciation with a deeper and better understanding of teaching and learning in rural contexts. Also, the exposure gave an opportunity to pre-service

teachers to plan and implement programs for more than one year level in a single classroom. The analysis of the data also showed that the beginning teachers posted to rural and remote schools have successfully adjusted themselves to working and living there. The inclusion of relevant components related to work and life in rural schools in the College pre-service program would certainly pave the way for qualitative growth in rural education. In doing so the College has attempted to address the long standing issues raised by educational observers and commentators together with educational researchers concerning pre-service teacher preparation especially for teaching in rural schools (e.g., Booth, Wilson, Lingam & Singh, 2000; Muralidhar, 1989; Thaman; 1989; Unesco, 1989). The professional preparation provided augurs well with life in rural schools. The need to learn about rural life very early in the teaching career would be helpful as demonstrated in the study.

Implications of the findings

Rural children like their urban counterparts have the right to quality education. When reflecting on teacher preparation for rural education, it became abundantly clear that prior to 2005 hardly any pre-service teachers received preparation for work in rural schools. It was only recently, that attempts were made to provide teachers with relevant training to work in rural schools. The feedback from the beginning teachers demonstrated that their preparation was compatible with the demands of teaching and learning in rural schools. In addition to equipping them with professional knowledge and skills, the College also went a step further in its training by exposing them to the ground realities of living and working in rural communities. From this it appears that the training paved the way for the beginning teachers to be successful in carrying out their work in the rural school they were posted to. The present study highlights that how beginning teachers adjust to rural life and work is shaped, in large part, by the initial training program. In this regard, the study reinforces the notion that without a good teacher training program it is unlikely to improve the quality of educational provision in any context.

It became apparent in this study that for an effective preparation of teachers for work in any jurisdiction appropriate opportunities need to be afforded to them during their initial training program. Both the theoretical and practical components need to be compatible with the teachers' world of work in a particular context. In this regard, the teacher training program afforded to the prospective teachers is important, and therefore crucial in meeting the maelstrom demands of work they would be required to carry in the school system upon graduation. The feedback from the College staff has demonstrated a clear preference for the innovative components in the pre-service program. It appeared that the College considered Katz (1984) suggestion that pre-service teachers were concerned about their survival in rural schools. The College has opted to provide the valuable hands on experience of teaching in rural schools in one of its professional practice segments and this was a way forward in terms of improving the preparation of teachers and in turn the quality of education in rural schools. The inclusion of various survival strategies in both the theoretical and practical components may have better acclimatized beginning teachers for work in rural schools.

The findings of the present study also have implications for further research on issues relating to rural education in developing contexts. In the case of Fiji, a follow-up research is recommended in order to determine the overall effectiveness of the partnership between the host school and the College in teacher preparation as well as on other issues surrounding teacher preparation. Such a research may spell out certain gaps in their roles which could then be strengthened for better preparation of teachers for rural education. Since no pre-service program can provide training for all eventualities likely to be faced by beginning teachers in the school system, a selected sample of beginning teachers could be surveyed to ascertain what initiatives they have taken to improve their professional duties and responsibilities in rural schools. In addition, future research could investigate whether any initiative for the preparation of rural teachers was in place in other teacher education institutions in the small island states of the Pacific and also how the regional university, namely, the University of the South Pacific catered for rural education in its teacher education programs. Despite this being a small-scale study and specifically focusing on the preparation of teachers for rural education, it has shed some useful insights about the institution's positive role towards teacher preparation for rural schools in the context of Fiji. This is a way forward because besides the difficult circumstances in rural settings, the multi-class teaching arrangement is certainly going to remain a norm for the foreseeable future as part of Fiji's schooling system and structure. Following this line of reasoning it is vital that instead of 'one shot' small-scale studies, more rural educational research endeavors are vital to inform and at the same time influence policy and practice both here in Fiji and in other jurisdictions as well.

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