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Impact of school locality on teaching and learning: A qualitative inquiry

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Abstract

This research examined the impact of school location on teaching and learning through a case study of two urban, two rural and two remote Fijian secondary schools. A total of 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 16 from each category of urban, rural and remote. Each school was represented by three teachers, three heads of department and two administrators. The study established that rural and remote schools often face different challenges to their urban counterparts: geography, poverty and funding influence the quality of education. Leadership support and adequate resources are the key to breaking the overreliance on traditional methods of teaching and enhancing student classroom interest and participation. Finally, just as schools serve different communities, geographical location impacts on external links, cooperation and professional exchange and development. Understanding the impact of school locality on teaching and learning in Fiji should benefit other developing nations and the educational community at large.

Key words

Teaching and learning; case study; urban, rural; remote; secondary schools; school locality

Introduction

Fiji is spread across 332 islands in the South Pacific Ocean, and according to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2018), has a population of 884,887 from which 494,252 (55.9%) reside in urban areas and 390,635 (44.1%) in rural and remote areas. The archipelagic and scattered geographical structure of Fiji means that it faces its own challenges in regard to teaching and learning. The distribution of schools has profound implications on the provision of education in Fiji. The geography of the country places constraints on accessibility as many remote schools are isolated, either by virtue of being on isolated islands or being located in rugged terrain on the larger islands.

In terms of actual enrolments, more children attend primary school in rural and remote areas compared to urban areas, whereas the reverse is true for secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2014). Location is closely linked to socio-economic status. Many rural and remote dwellers do not have reliable sources of income. Fijians living in villages rely on subsistence farming and fishing for food,

but also need cash for many of their needs, including education (Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel, & Fiji Ministry of Education, 2000). Many remote schools are boarding schools, compared to urban schools, as boarding can be a positive factor for extra classes, homework and study.

There is little need to speak English in rural and remote areas in Fiji. English spoken by children in rural and remote areas is less developed to that of urban children (Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel, & Fiji Ministry of Education, 2000). According to the Ministry of Education (2015b), English is the official language of instruction in schools in Fiji. There are two other major languages which are the indigenous Fijian 'iTaukei' language and the Hindi language which, under the new language policy, has become compulsory in all schools. Language may be a barrier to education as English is the second language for most students in schools. At the primary level, most teachers find it convenient to teach in the students' mother tongue for greater understanding at the beginning stages of education (Ministry of Education, 2015b). The transition to English can come at a later stage in primary schooling. English remains a major challenge to most students at the secondary level.

The schools in Fiji represent a variety of managing authorities. There are very few government schools. The majority of the schools are committee-run while some are also conducted by religious organisations (Ministry of Education, 2015a). There are more committee-run schools in rural and remote areas than in urban centres. Most urban schools are run by well-established religious organisations, which may give the management more accountability and stability (Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel, & Fiji Ministry of Education, 2000). However, Fiji has a centralised curriculum development unit called Curriculum Advisory Services which is mandated to review, design and implement the national curriculum (Koya, 2015).

Rural and remote areas tend to be steeped in traditional culture, with relatively fewer outside influences compared to urban areas. There is thus a cultural hegemony, a singular worldview, which may have different priorities from those espoused by the school system (Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel, & Fiji Ministry of Education, 2000). Teachers are expected to participate in and conform to the host community. This places an extra burden on teachers, as they are effectively on duty 24 hours a day, and their actions are constantly under the scrutiny of the community (Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel, & Fiji Ministry of Education, 2000). As there are various factors that affect the teaching and learning in Fiji, this study tries to investigate what impact school location has on its everyday business. The findings of this research could provide policy makers and administrators with valuable insights into the impact of locality on teaching and learning and how to best accommodate into educational policy development to reduce the effect of locality in the Fijian education system.

Literature

Parents play a crucial role in the educational context because they provide financial, emotional and moral support to their children. Schools serve different communities, and students' varied backgrounds and characteristics impact on their schools' achievement (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). In this regard, Hanushek and Woessmann (2012) reported that there was a strong association between educational achievement and many measures of student and family background. Often those students with low socio-economic status feel depressed and demotivated on educational matters, since they encounter various difficulties including the cost of learning materials and individual needs such as accommodation, food, transportation and clothing (Ögeyik, 2016).

Parental support is not guaranteed in poverty stricken rural areas where many parents may be uneducated or have little formal education (Marks, Cresswell, & Ainley, 2006). Most parents with little formal education invariably do not collaborate well with school (Khumalo & Mji, 2014), whilst those who have attained a high level of western education are more likely to have a positive attitude towards school and more encouraging of the educational efforts of their children (Ogbugo-Ololube, 2016; Steinmayr, Dinger, & Spinath, 2010; Strenze, 2007). The greatest academic support providing parent-child and parent-teacher interaction (Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006) involves more highly educated parents with higher educational expectations for their children (Suizzo, 2007).

Research in Australia also suggests that young people living in rural and isolated parts of the country have poorer educational and labour market outcomes than their urban counterparts (Lamb,

Glover, & Walstab, 2014; Lamb & Mason, 2008). One reason for this is that urban areas offer better employment prospects, particularly for highly skilled workers, and families in rural and remote areas tend to have lower levels of socioeconomic status (Lamb et al., 2014). Backgrounds often correlate with lower academic achievement and poorer outcomes (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Lamb et al., 2014; New-Comb et al. 2002; Nweke, Ihejirika, & Deebom, 2018). Similarly, a Canadian study reporting sizeable rural and urban gaps in education showed that the differences were most strongly related to community factors (Cartwright & Allen, 2002). Hence, as schools serve in different communities, the challenges facing them, vary in turn.

Rural and remote schools often face complex challenges, such as poverty, school funding and geographic isolation. These impact on the quality of education that students receive (Lingam & Lingam, 2013; Ogbugo-Ololube, 2016). Rural and remote schools may have lower educational outcomes due to certain resource constraints (Steinmayr et al., 2010). Ogbugo-Ololube (2016) established that rural and remote teachers are often frustrated because they have to work with fewer resources and have much less control over the curriculum. Resource constraints include tough competition for highly qualified and experienced teachers, school financial distress and the number of students living in poverty (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010). As well as these issues, rural and remote schools are often smaller and more expensive to operate, more likely to experience teacher shortages and have fewer resources (Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), 2013).

In addition, as schools serve different communities, a school's geographical location plays an important part in relation to the links it is able to make with external partners (Mohan, 2016; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Rural and remote schools have difficulty collaborating with others (Broadley, 2012), whereas urban collaboration is easier due to easy access to transport and technology connectivity (Lingam & Lingam, 2013; Mohan, Lingam, & Chand, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006). According to Lamb et al. (2014), the effects of location on schools and teachers include limited opportunity for involvement in broad policy discussions; limited opportunities for professional exchange and development; restricted access to support systems, such as specialist resources; and restricted access to resource provision. Therefore, it is acknowledged that due to the scattered nature of schools in Fiji, their locality could have a major impact on teaching and learning. However, there is no research evidence as yet in the Fijian context; hence, this research was deemed necessary.

Methodology

This study was deliberately designed to collect qualitative data for qualitative analysis. Focusing on the phenomenological aspect of qualitative research allowed the study to incorporate teachers' perceptions, both emotional and intellectual, about the impact of locality on teaching and learning in Fiji. The Ministry of Education in Fiji has established guidelines for classifying schools as urban, rural or remote. Urban schools are within 10km of a town boundary, a rural school is one that is 10–20km from a town boundary; and remote is equal to or greater than 20km from a town boundary (Lingam & Lingam, 2013). Based on the Ministry of Education's criteria, two urban, two rural and two remote schools were selected for the study to carry out the semi-structured interviews. For the purpose of this study, open-ended semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate. An interview is a social process of exchanging information between the interviewer and the interviewee where the interviewer questions, listens to the response, interprets and analyses for understanding and then explains to the respondents; the process continuous until all questions are answered to the satisfaction of both parties (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006).

Forty-eight teachers, 16 from each category of urban, rural and remote, participated in semi-structured interviews. Each school was represented by three teachers, three heads of department and two administrators (principal/vice principal/assistant principal). Overall, participants were from all the subject areas taught in Fijian secondary schools and qualifications ranged from diplomas to postgraduate degrees. The interviews were approximately one hour in length and focused on the impact of locality on teaching and learning. With permission from the participants, the interviews were digitally recorded to maintain accuracy. The transcribed data went through member checking before being subjected to qualitative analysis through the process of coding, which allowed categories and themes to be derived

from the actual data (Saldana, 2013). In this paper, A and B represent urban schools, C and D rural, and E and F represent remote schools. The quotes from the interviews are notated as follows: A T3 = School A, Teacher 3; C HOD1 = School C, Head of Department 1; E A2= School E, Administrator 2; and so forth. Even though only selected quotes are presented in this paper, it is representative of the views of the majority of the participants.

Findings and Discussion

Parents play a crucial role in education by providing financial, emotional and moral support to their children whose different backgrounds impact on their level of achievement (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). As compared to their urban counterparts, rural and remote schools face challenges of poverty, funding levels and geography, all of which impact on the quality of education that students receive (Ogbugo-Ololube, 2016). This study confirmed that rural and remote schools are often left with lower achievers as the higher achievers from remote and rural schools tend to relocate to urban schools in their search for improved educational facilities and better education. As one rural teacher explained,

> We as rural teachers go through a lot of challenges. One of challenge is lack of resources and infrastructure and because of this our brighter students look for schools with better facilities and move out and we are left with average and below average students. We again have to start from square one, work hard to make the students pass and then they move on. But we cannot blame the students or parents. Every parent wants better education for their children, including me. (C T3)

As a result, remote and rural teachers tend to confront disadvantaged students whose generally uneducated or minimally educated parents may be less supportive of learning (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). Conversely, it also revealed that large class sizes clearly impact on the practices of urban teachers. Due to urban shift in Fiji, city schools with larger class sizes experienced more management issues such as space, time and activities as well as negative student behaviour. Hence, urban teachers face more classroom management issues, namely the application of strategies focused on minimising disruption and increasing student cooperation (Postholm, 2013), as an urban HOD commented,

> Since we are a city school, we are challenged with large class size. We have classes with more than 40 students, so it becomes a challenge to manage the class, especially for our new teachers. (A HOD 2)

Teachers and school administrators face a common challenge in creating educational environments that support student academic needs and commitment to schoolwork (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Supporting students should permeate the culture of a school (Louis & Lee, 2016) backed by a common understanding that strong student support is rooted in comprehensible instructional practices (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). To support student learning, the study unpacked that teachers took morning, lunch, afternoon, evening and Saturday classes to help students do better academically. One remote teacher said,

> I usually take Saturday classes for my students who will sit for external exams at the end of the year. As you know this is a remote school and students can only get extra help from us and nowhere else. Unlike urban students who can employ tutors for extra coaching. (F T2)

Poverty, school funding and locality impact on the quality of education. In addition, this research shows that some urban and remote schools were better equipped than rural schools in terms of facilities. In Fiji some urban and remote teachers can provide academic support outside of school hours because students live in hostels, but hostels are not available in the rural setting. One of the urban HODs observed that

some of our students stay in the hostel and to supervise the students we also have school quarters for some of the teachers. So these hostel students have extra classes, in the morning and in the evening. (A HOD 1)

Similarly, E T1 noted:

We take morning, afternoon, and evening classes for our students who stay in the hostel. We teachers are free in the evening as there is not much to do here in a remote location. (E T1)

On the other hand, some teachers did not live close by, as C HOD3 pointed out:

We do not have school quarters, for us we have to travel long distances every day. For that reason, I cannot take morning classes even though I would love to. Our students also have to travel by bus every day, so it is hard in the afternoon to take extra classes.

Resources and leadership affect teachers' engagement with innovative teaching practices, and rural and remote teachers often feel frustrated at their shortage of resources and minimal control over the curriculum. With ICT impacting rapidly and constantly on teaching methods and learning patterns in twenty-first century classrooms (Ögeyik, 2017; Oyelekan & Omiwale, 2017), leadership support and adequate resources are the key to breaking the overreliance of the pervasive *chalk and talk* methodologies, and promoting students' classroom interest and participation (Yaduvanshi, Shivam, & Singh, 2017). E T3 said,

I want to use innovative teaching methods to teach my students, so that the lessons are interesting, and students are able to understand concepts better but due to lack of resources, for example, no computer and internet services in the classrooms, make it impossible, hence, we don't have much choice then to stick to chalk and talk method. (E T3)

Just as schools serve different communities, their geographical location affects the links they can make with external partners (Mohan, 2015; Stoll et al., 2006). This study found that the level of isolation had little effect on teachers' reflective dialogue on professional practices in remote schools. Whilst teacher perceptions aligned across the study schools, reflective dialogue practices varied more between urban and rural teachers than between urban and remote schools. Teachers in remote schools remained around the school compound and often were engaged in reflective practices after school. With limited other activities available in remote areas, teachers often either interacted around a 'bowl of *Kava*', or, even if not enjoying this Fijian traditional drink, they participated in *Talanoa* (informal discussions) on issues of interest. A remote teacher commented on the sense of community, saying,

One thing is good when we teach in remote schools is that we stay in the school quarters. We have a lot of free time where we teachers get together in the evenings for *Talanoa* sessions on the interesting and common issues of school, sometimes while enjoying the Fijian traditional drink around a bowl of *Kava,* or even without. (E T3)

Meanwhile, backed by good access to resources and infrastructure, urban teachers were able to engage in reflective dialogue during normal school hours, as pointed out by this urban teacher:

We have separate department rooms. Every department sits separately so we get a lot of time to discuss, share and learn from each other as we all are from the same subject area. (B T2)

Despite practices being unique to their own remote and urban contexts, the positive finding was that these Fijian teachers often engage in reflective dialogue on best practices. Conversely, after-school discussion was limited for rural teachers who have no school quarters and so must travel long distances to go home, and who lacked resources and infrastructure supportive of reflective dialogue. The situation was even worse in rural schools where school leaders neither supported nor encouraged collegial reflection.

Conclusion

As schools serve different communities, student background characteristics impact on the achievement level of a school. Rural and remote schools often face different challenges to their urban counterparts: geography, poverty and funding influence the quality of education. Rural and remote schools often have lower achievements and educational aspirations and higher achievers drift to urban schools in search for improved facilities and educational opportunities. Consequently, remote and rural teachers are left with students who are disadvantaged by resources and economic circumstances, as well as uneducated or minimally educated parents who may be less supportive of learning (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). Meanwhile, urban shift in the Fijian population means that urban teachers face larger class sizes, as well as management issues such as space, time and student behaviour that impact on their teaching practices.

Fijian teachers and school administrators face a common challenge in creating educational environments that support student academic needs and commitment to schoolwork. Both rural and remote teachers are often frustrated at having inadequate resources and little control over the curriculum. Leadership support and adequate resources are the key to breaking the overreliance on traditional teaching and enhancing student classroom interest and participation.

The negative impact of isolation of teachers could be reduced by access to school quarters so that teachers could stay in the school compound and engage in collegial learning and support students academically after hours, building on the rich community traditions of Fijian culture. Where feasible and economical, technology could offer a convenient option for rural and remote students and teachers, noting that the culture of an online collaborative learning is not simply a network of students and/or teachers who can communicate over distances but one that provides access to fundamental dialogue between professionals around curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment (Broadley, 2012). Proper planning and effective technological connectivity to the 'outside world' is essential for all schools, regardless of its locality.

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