

Education Reforms in Fiji and its Impact on the Education System

Keynote address at Fiji Teachers Union Annual Conference

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Thank you for the invitation and a warm welcome. It is an honor and privilege to be invited to deliver the keynote address at the 89th Fiji Teachers Union Annual Conference. It is heartening to see so many of you sacrificing few days of your school holidays to attend this conference.

Teachers are the core of any education system and it is an honour to be speaking about education reforms in Fiji and its impact on our education system and in particular on our teachers and their future.

Global education reform movement

From an economic perspective, a well performing education system is crucial for long term sustainable economic growth and prosperity. The fast changing dynamics of global economy is not only impacting businesses but also influencing education systems around the world. Within this context, the discourse has evolved towards the need for a highly skilled and educated work force. This has motivated policymakers around the world to expand access to schooling and enhance its quality and relevance.

There is no doubt that globalization supported by multilateral institutional arrangements have influenced a worldwide shift in the accepted purpose and process of education. Education is now increasingly seen as a means for securing economic and political power at both the national and household levels.

Education, however, is much more than economic activity. It has been effectively regarded as a human right and nations have embarked towards tracking progress in educational access and quality.

With these dynamic changes unfolding all over the world, there is an increasing reliance on market driven strategies to drive social policy. Education reforms are not an exception. As a result, educational reforms are increasingly being created and implemented using business management models and processes. Eventually, these reforms directly impact teachers in terms of job stability, individual performance evaluations, pay linked to performance, and other work conditions.

These and other reforms that are currently being promoted in global education policy markets have been commonly termed as global education reform movement. Some of these reforms have attracted intense scrutiny by educators, researchers and policy advisors. Professor Pasi Sahlberg¹, one of the world's leading thinkers on education reforms, has described these reforms as full of contradictions and

¹Pasi Sahlberg is a Finnish educator and author who has studied education systems, analyzed education policies, and advised education reforms around the world. His recent books include "Hard Questions on Global Educational Change" and "Empowered Educators in Finland".

paradoxes. Professor Sahlberg further argues that current market driven reforms as part of a global education reform movement is spreading and negatively impacting education systems like a virus.

Another very popular education program that is worth mentioning is the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project which was dubbed as a digital revolution in education. It was also supported by the United Nations and was argued to be the largest educational project the world has ever seen. Two of the largest One Laptop per Child programs in the world were rolled out in Peru² and Uruguay³. Empirical evidence from both countries suggest that the program did not show any positive effects on enrollment and test scores in mathematics and language.

In our region, Pacific Island Ministers of Education agreed to implement the One Laptop per Child project in 2007. In 2008, pilot programs began in Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. In Fiji, it was introduced in 2012.

A study published in 2018 by researchers from University of California (Berkeley) provides a fascinating account of how the program was doomed to fail in Papua

²Melo, G., Machado, A. and Miranda, A. (2014), *The Impact of a One Laptop per Child Program on Learning: Evidence from Uruguay*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 8489, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn.

³Crista, J., Ibararan, P., Cueto, S., Santiago, A. and Severin, E. (2012), *Technology and Child Development: Evidence from One Laptop per Child Program in Peru*, Discussion Paper No. 6401, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn.

New Guinea⁴. The research provides five reasons why the program became dormant within 4 years of its implementation. One of them relate to the program's relation to the existing curriculum and the usefulness of the software to provide meaningful support to achieve outcomes.

The lessons from “One Laptop per Child” story to both developing country education systems and donors is that one size does not fit all. Blindly borrowing policies invariably fail because countries possess different political, social and educational norms which require appropriate adaptation. It is in this context that I will now talk about the educational reforms that have been undertaken in Fiji the last 10 years.

Overview of educational reforms in Fiji

The theme of your convention, ‘Education reforms and its impact in Fiji’ is timely and relevant.

No one should underestimate the impact of Education reforms. They can be powerful in both ways. If they are well planned, well intentioned, well implemented, it can bring positive outcomes. However, if it is forced down the

⁴ Saxe, G. and Kirby, K. (2018), *Analyzing the Evolution of a Digital Technology Intervention: One Laptop Per Child in a Remote Papua New Guinea Community*, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 4, pp. 394-412.

throat of stakeholders, teachers and unions by dictatorial forces without dialogue and consultation then the damage can be long lasting and disastrous.

In Fiji, a number of education reforms have been introduced over the last decade. Education reforms are not new to Fiji and we have had a long legacy of policy borrowing during 96 years of colonial rule. As a result, much of our education system was based on a British model but has been reformed over time to meet local circumstances and needs.

The more recent reforms, however, seem to have created real troublesome differences between the Ministry of Education and the two teacher unions. The reforms include the open merit recruitment system,

This has created a lot instability and uncertainty not only amongst the teachers but the broader stakeholder community including parents, school managements and faith based organizations. The overall processes of reforms have also often been fraught with political controversy and sometimes difficult to follow. At the same time, the approach of reforms seem unclear if not paradoxical.

From a broader perspective, recent reforms in Fiji are centered on apath and discourse with the following characteristics:

- Professional voice of teachers is not required

- Teacher effectiveness will be improved through removal of tenure and introduction of contracts linked to performance pay
- Demonize and weaken the teacher unions
- School managements are wasteful and ineffective
- Bureaucrats are real reformers and care about quality and accountability. All other stakeholders only seek to preserve the status quo
- When reforms don't work, blame the failure on human resources, schools and teachers which neatly excuses politicians

When these type of expressions are used to frame the debate on education reforms, it disguises the real agenda. It also effectively aims to shut out any opposition. If someone questions the logic of reforms, she or he is accused to be living in the past.

During the recent set of reforms, there have been numerous complaints by teacher unions, parents and school managements about the lack of clarity and direction and clear guidelines for implementation. In addition, they feel that the pace of education reform gives little space for thoughtful discussion and implementation

Ladies and Gentlemen, educational reform represents a long term focus and its goal is quality and relevant education for all. It is also important to note that recent education reforms are happening in a different context than previous eras of major

changes in education system. Historically, every reform era has been different in Fiji but the current period seems dictatorial compared to the previous ones.

The current set of unilateral reforms have created feelings of fear, distrust and uncertainty not only amongst teachers but school managements as well. The general tone underlying much of the reforms is depressing. There seem to be disconnect between the intentions of those who have formulated the reform policies and the ability of those who are responsible for its implementation.

This is not to say that high standards through reforms should not be desired but the way to get there is equally important and seems to be more challenging.

So, how do we reframe the narrative away from these type of characterizations in order to achieve success in securing ongoing sustainable reform?

First and most importantly, policy makers need to work in collaboration with teachers, teacher unions, school managements and other stakeholders. Policy makers do not necessarily have all the answers to problems. They need to understand, that consultation, dialogue, thorough analysis of policies before implementation is always the surest way to get the support of the stakeholders and achieve better outcomes. The government needs to understand that not all reforms would be accepted in the same spirit. Bringing about change in outcomes through reforms is not easy and can be a slow and tedious process. Therefore reforms and

the approach to reforms has to be carefully considered and consulted before implementing in order to maximize the impact on expected outcomes.

Better outputs and outcomes can be achieved through collaboration and working together. This collaboration needs to focus on developing trust in terms of understanding of what the reform means, the outcome of reform and ways to identify the magnitude of this impact. Once this is established, a clear communication strategy for incremental changes should be adopted to implement various aspects of the reform.

Otherwise reforms will be taken at face value. It will exist in the form of documents only and fulfill the requirements for reporting purposes. Real changes in terms of actual practices might rarely happen and intended outcomes will remain elusive.

The need for a climate of 'trust based responsibility' is important as education reforms are politically one of the hardest reforms to push through anywhere in the world.

There can be many reasons why reforms fail to have an impact and there is no single reason that explains all failures. However, a common reason for failure is poor implementation because of a lack of collective understanding and appreciation from all stakeholders.

Sometimes stakeholders only hear about education policies and reforms when they are announced in the media. In this scenario, it becomes difficult to see the bigger picture and stakeholders begin to question the real motive behind the policy change or reform. Even if there is some level of initial acceptance, linking intention and implementation remains questionable.

Collaboration is not only about good decision making but it is also about good leadership. Our communities have a history of working together cooperatively in the provision for education. The last thing the government would want to do is to assault the collective community spirit that went into establishing majority of our schools. Genuine partnership in reforms will provide opportunity for all stakeholders to pool ideas, collectively plan resources and implement reforms. Such an approach has the possibility of creating individual stakeholder responsibility for the outcomes of their efforts.

On a positive note, however, I see the new Minister Hon Rosy Akbar, who herself is an experienced teacher and a product of that genuine partnership, seems to be working with teachers, unions, school managements and faith based organizations to bring about that collaborative and cooperative culture in resolving the many issues that confront the education system today.

Second, learning from past policy making and implementation practices is important. Reforms should be benchmarked against experience, practices and evidence that has served the education system well in the past.

Take for instance, the performance based pay reform currently under progress. This is not new to Fiji. It was first introduced in 2002 under the performance management system. Teachers from all over the country attended workshops to familiarize with the system and assessors were trained to evaluate teachers.

Some unions agreed with the system while others did not and the matter went to arbitration. In October 2005, government arbitrator William Callancinni ruled that the government's performance management system did not promote equity in pay determination, lacked objectivity and the criteria were not easily measured and was confusing and cumbersome.

Just before the arbitration decision, Fijian Teachers Union claimed that 90% of its members had qualified for bonus payments or increments under the system and that the government was delaying the payments. Is there any parallel that you can draw from what is happening now?

Even The World Bank at that time recommended the suspension of the performance management system and the reintroduction of the cost of living adjustment. As far as I know this is the same World Bank which is now backing

the Open Merit Recruiting Selection policy. In early 2006, the performance management system was eventually abandoned.

It is important to search for strategies to improve the public education system. However, one needs to be careful about policy referencing and borrowing. What has worked in one country may not work in another. Yes, nations should learn from one another. However, this requires a systematic exchange of ideas about policies and not just identifying one promising approach. To be effective, education reforms have to reach into even the most distant classrooms.

The government is investing a large share of public funds into the primary and secondary educational system. More funding to schools is important and it is a good thing but to expect that it alone will deliver quality outcomes can never be guaranteed.

Where to from here?

Education system is expected to and should change as circumstances change. Reforms are necessary to enhance the quantity and quality of education in order to meet the needs of our students and the society within the changing local and global contexts. The government should recognize that Fiji since independence has been able to build a robust education system where access to education was a big success. It must acknowledge that achievement and build on it. There have been

several reforms undertaken over the last 10 years, some which have been reversed. Reform of the education system is very sensitive. Reforms going wrong can destroy the opportunities for one whole generation. That is why it is not just about more money for the education ministry. It is about carefully understanding the consequences and impact of reforms that must be taken seriously. What we need is an independent evaluation of the education system and indeed a call for an education commission makes sense.

A thorough analysis of the education system by experts in an independent manner will inform good policy reforms. The findings of the Commission will help in the design of education reforms and rigorous understanding of the outcomes of specific policy choices. Focusing on the output without clearly understanding outcomes will not be sustainable.

The current approach towards reforms in Fiji seem at odds with collaboration, reflection and evidence based practice that is needed in order to improve our education system. In this case, success in securing ongoing sustainable reform cannot be guaranteed.

As in other countries, the education sector here will always remain a very sensitive issue for stakeholders. For many people in this country, access to education has not

always been easy. A little bit of history will tell us why the majority of the schools are owned by faith and community based organizations.

While the Ministry of Education has shown political will towards reforms and policy intervention, there is a need to work with teachers, teacher unions and school administrators to ensure that reforms are efficient. Education reforms need a human face to bring them alive and teachers have a pivotal role in ensuring how the education system put its policies into practice. There is a need to understand the concerns of teachers and deal with their problems in an amicable and collegial manner.

Policy makers must also realize that abruptly announced reforms create concern amongst stakeholders including teachers, parents and school managements. It also defeats well established norms and ideas that our communities have guarded devotedly.

Policy makers also need to ensure that the reforms are adequately resourced and are coherent over sustained periods of time.

After a tumultuous few years of policy making towards education reforms, it is perhaps time to actually pause, think and see what it is that we really want from our education system.

Before I conclude, I would like to quote a paragraph from Professor Stephen Dinham's address to the Australian College of Educators a few years ago in support of what I said earlier about the role of teachers and unions:

“A tsunami comprises waves with very long wave lengths. Often these go unnoticed until it is too late to do anything about them. When they reach land, great devastation can result. The long wave of changes to education need to be subjected to intense scrutiny before it is too late. If the profession remains silent and passive in the face of some of these developments we will only have ourselves to blame for what might eventuate.”

I think this is a relevant warning for all of us here today.

Finally, there is a need to have a united teacher union movement with a strong professional voice at the national level. As a union, you must build teacher union unity. You also need to build alliances with parents and the broader community to support your cause. As members, you have role to play to make your union stronger. The future is uncertain and that is why you need a stronger and united union.

Fiji Teachers Union has played a crucial role in reforming the education system in Fiji. Among other achievements, it played a powerful role during the 1973, 1982, 1993 and 2003 Job Review Exercises. Eighty nine years later since its

inception, FTU has sixteen branches and over 5000 members. It has also established group life and health insurance and a strong credit union to provide a facility for saving and borrowing. These are commendable achievements.

The above are praiseworthy achievements of the FTU in its long history. However, we are now leaving in 21st Century and FTU needs to reflect on how it is going to remain relevant and vibrant. FTU should reflect on the modus operandi and reorient the activities to suit the younger members and how they can contribute to the overall strengthening of the union movement.

As a teacher union, you don't only have a duty to protect your members but to also protect the future of education. If you are concerned about the future of education, you need to take a stand and demand the set of dialogues that will provide the relevant input into the reforms. Otherwise teachers will continue to be victims of seemingly contradictory policies and initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you good luck in your deliberations during the conference. Once again, thank you for the invitation.