

Challenges for the Fijian Teaching Profession in the New Decade¹

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Introduction

It is indeed a pleasure for me to be here today to deliver this address. I thank the FTU for honouring me by inviting me to open its 82nd annual conference. Eighty two years for a trade union and an industrial association is a long period of time. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of all the past presidents, general secretaries and officials of the FTU for keeping the union alive and strong. I would also like to acknowledge the current leadership of the FTU for ensuring that the union remains a dynamic and vibrant body representing the interests of education in Fiji.

A lot has happened in the education field in recent times. No longer in Fiji do we suffer from lack of opportunity or access to education. The last time the FTU held its AGM in Lautoka, there was only one university in the country. Now we have three universities operating in Lautoka alone. And this is within a period of ten years. Fiji has made enormous strides in educational development over the last many decades. Your National President has outlined a number of challenges that you and the Education Ministry need to sit down and tackle. I want to go a bit beyond that and, as they say, shake the glass.

If we cast our minds back to the days when we were students in primary and secondary schools, we would begin to see the challenges the profession faced then, and how it emerged from these challenges. I recall very clearly in my village, the only motor vehicle anyone in the village had was the head master's vehicle; this was, if truth be told, after my grandfather's Volkswagen was wrecked by one of his sons. In the village

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in those days, none of the staff quarters had electricity, and none had running water; there were even no taps in the school. It was either rain water or water carted from the river that served the needs of the school. In rural areas further inland, the challenges were yet greater. These were in the 1960's; imagine the challenges in the 1930's and earlier when curriculum was not clearly established and illiteracy was rampant; when cash wages were not the order of the day, and indeed when the colonial government hardly emphasized education for either the common i'Taukei or the Indian Fijians. The challenges of those days included remoteness, illiteracy, facilities, resources, access, salaries, curriculum, and, of course, colonial rule which dreaded educated *coolies* and *kaivitis*.

Yet the teachers pursued relentlessly in educating Fiji. They sacrificed for the love of education. We know that many teachers taught without salaries on numerous occasions. Teachers in the villages were the effective leaders; nothing in the area moved without consultation with the teachers. I pay tribute to the generation of teachers who are responsible for what Fiji's educational standards now are; for what we all are; for what I am today; and for what Fiji is now.

Fiji has made significant progress in Education. So much so, numerous countries are looking at the experience of Fiji in getting universal education to its population, as an experience to emulate. That could only have been possible because of the hard work of all the teachers, irrespective of whether they belong to FTU or not.

The strides made in the last couple of years is of unimagined proportions. The Government has taken over the responsibility of text book provisions for primary schools. It has started paying for children's bus fares. With these two measures, the Government has taken care of two of the largest burdens of educating a child. I would like to commend the Government and the Honourable Minister for Education, Ambassador Filipe Bole, for taking these bold steps. The day when each child in primary schools would have a meal is not far. We could perhaps start with a glass of milk for primary schools, or better still a bowl of *dhal*, adequately laced with greens like *saijan* or other seasonable vegetables. How much would this cost? No more than \$6-7 million a year, a very small sum to feed all of our 130,000 primary school kids with this health enriching staple, thereby further strengthening the society with a rising social wage. Those days are not too far into the future.

But today I am not here to talk about those. I have been asked to talk about the challenges that the teaching profession faces during this decade. The challenges now compared to those of the 1900's, are far scarcer and in-between, but by no means far lower. Different environments provide

different challenges. I spent a good part of yesterday looking through UNESCO's 2010 report on the status of education throughout the world. And I found myself reflecting on the challenges in the teaching profession and the educational field. I listed almost 30 of these. Some of them have been articulated ably by the National President this morning, but many have not been articulated in the recent past. I would like to spend some time dwelling on those.

I have divided the challenges faced into two categories. The first category is a list of institutional challenges and the second category lists personal and professional challenges.

Institutional Challenges

Curriculum

In the category of institutional challenges, one of the major challenges facing the teaching profession that I see has to do with the curriculum itself. Curriculum is at the heart of the education system; it determines what we educate and train our students in; it determines how we educate and train them; it determines for what we train and educate our students, and it determines the type of future we all will have.

The last global revolution – that of ICT - has fundamentally transformed the teaching profession. Never before have the challenges been more interesting, your work more visible, and our opportunity to advance education greater. The greatest challenge for Fiji's education is whether our school curriculum has kept pace with the rapidly evolving global economy. My answer is in an emphatic negative. This is a question that needs to be addressed on a continuous basis by the education community.

The foundation of a dynamic curriculum is a competent Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). It is my suggestion that as a matter of *policy*, only the brightest and the best minds must qualify for employment in the CDU. It must be worrying to any educator to have, as has been the case for most of the 1990's to the present, people who barely made a C grade in their studies, become lead CDU staff. Fiji cannot progress with this approach to education. I propose for your consideration the creation of a separate stream in the employment service for the CDU, and the Examinations Office, where employees must have quality post graduate qualifications – even upto PhD levels - in the content that each would be responsible for at the Unit. These staff need to be adequately remunerated and recognized.

Examinations and Assessments

Related to the curriculum, is the challenge of exams and assessments. The National President has talked about the matter of internal assessment. Let me add a few words on this.

Fiji has made rapid headway in changing its achievement assessment process from one that was fully based on external examinations to one which is a combination of internal and external assessments. In June 2009, Cabinet agreed to the submission by the Ministry of Education to abolish the Fiji Intermediate, Fiji Eighth Year and Fiji Junior Certificate Examinations. The submission, as the policy on exams and assessments states, was based on the recommendation of the *Education Commission 2000* and global trends in Education that has seen a shift towards less emphasis on external examinations. The shift is now towards standards assessment and continuous school-based assessment for learning that tests skills, knowledge and attitudes on a regular basis; the focus being child-centred learning.

Internal Assessment (IA) is a more challenging responsibility. Education policy has recognised the important elements of IA. Unfortunately, however, major challenges remain. First, Fiji has a lack of institutional experience in this area – which only years of experience can address. This leads to stocking our knowledge bases through trials and errors. Second, concerns the *Inspectorate System*. This is at the heart of a quality IA system. The policy objective is excellent - external inspectors shall visit each school and assess the quality of teaching and assessments. This is akin to an external auditor in a financial environment. Inspections shall 'target teaching and learning processes inside the classrooms', be 'independent, rigorous, open and fair', and 'focus on children's needs so they realise their full potential', etc. Unfortunately, the Inspectors we have are untrained except possibly in examining paper records. In 2010, the FNU proposed a programme for training inspectors; the Ministry did not even formally acknowledge the submission.

But even if we trained the inspectors we have, the issue of quantity remains. The Ministry has provision for only one inspection per term and 1 per year for Rotuma and island students. And this too is focussed on paper reports, with no classroom visits. There are nine education districts in Fiji, each with one Principal Education Officer (PEO), one Senior Education Officer (SEO), and one Education Officer (EO) - a total of 3 officers in each district for primary schools, and similar numbers for secondary schools. This is thoroughly insufficient for giving effect to the intent of the system, and to IA efficacy generally. The result is a lack of guaran-

tee of completion of IA tasks, a huge variation in the tasks completed by schools, and almost no external verification of the quality of internal assessments done.

The second leg of assessment is external assessment. This requires quality testing of the overall knowledge that students need to have gained in the respective subjects. For this, quality questions are absolutely essential. One of the major challenges before us is the quality of examination papers. Year after year, we have one paper or another which has incorrect questions, or which have questions with no answers, or where we have questions where the model answers given to markers are either confusing to the markers or have incorrect components. Plagiarism of questions is a major issue, which has even been noted by the judiciary in a recent high court and court of appeal case which the Ministry lost badly. Almost every one dealing with student assessments knows of these. Yet, no one dares to raise these matters as matters of concern. This is a very serious issue for the profession. Fixing the problem of answerless questions, etc., should be the easiest of all - all it needs is the appointment of competent staff in exams office. As a first step, anyone with a GPA of less than 4 in the content/subject for which he/she is responsible, must be transferred out of the exams office promptly. We must also have a policy decision to send people with GPAs of 4+ for PG training in the subject area, so that over the next decade, Fiji manages to get at least 15 PhD holders - the e15 core exam subjects - employed in the CDU and exams sections.

Finally, the matter of mark scaling needs to be addressed. Mark scaling has been a matter of perpetual discussion in Fiji; the matter was even raised in the parliament, where the Education Minister was put to task on this; her response was nothing but garbled defence of scaling. What the teaching profession needs to demand is transparency on scaling. Greater awareness on the method used in scaling could probably end much debate on this. The more credible solution is for students to get both, the raw marks and the scaled marks - but this is policy-wise unpalatable. This state will remain until a credible Freedom of Information legislation is put in place in Fiji. Until then, teachers must ask for greater information to be released on scaling.

Teaching Competencies

Content competencies, literacy competencies, numeracy competencies, technology competencies (ability to handle mobile phones, ipods and ipads; IT savvy), and methodology competencies are aspects of competencies which education stakeholders - the Ministry and the Unions in

particular - need to be forever vigilant on. If I were to be bold, I would state that Fiji needs teachers whose content and literacy competencies need to be substantially improved. Obviously one would need to point the fingers at the leaders of the universities training teachers. These entities must raise the qualities of their graduates. But this is not sufficient in itself, for, in the spectrum of graduates, there will be good ones and there will be poor graduates - a normal curve of graduates is not abnormal.

The challenge is on the employer to select the best product available. Unfortunately, to date, the employer of teachers in Fiji has preferred those for whom the Government has given scholarships, irrespective of whether that person is a quality graduate. At present, a mere C-grader who studied under government sponsorship would be preferred for employment as a teacher to an A-grader who self-financed his/her studies. This mindset needs to change without delay. Fiji will have a huge pool of teachers for the Government to select from. This will create a vastly different employment market for teachers.

Another matter that poses challenge is promotions. As for initial intake, the current promotion system is replete with ancient bureaucratic inefficiencies. Promotions need to be merit based. For teachers, this comprises two elements: content competencies, and the ability to deliver the content. Content competencies are obtained first and foremost, in tertiary institutions during the currencies of obtaining a subject qualification, while 'delivery' competencies are obtained in the teacher training (education) component of a tertiary qualification.

Content competency, however, does not end with the first degree. Knowledge keeps advancing; as such teachers need to continue to update their stock of knowledge of the subject. Technologies keep developing; teachers need to continue to update their stock of knowledge of technology in delivery of content. These aspects are missing from Fiji's education system. A vast majority of teachers neither upgrade their content levels, nor do simple things like read magazines or books in their areas. What has emerged more recently, however, is the increasing number of teachers who study for post graduate courses in education. Most of the PG courses revolve around an area called 'educational administration'. There are hardly any PG courses in curriculum development, assessment and evaluation, educational research, technology in education, science education, or commerce education, etc., - areas which are critical for advancing educational standards. This is a worry for me. A qualified teacher does not need more doses of educational administration; she needs more doses of what to teach and how to teach better with emerging technologies. Proliferation of the teaching profession with those who have studied

educational management or educational administration only creates an environment for cut-throat competition for school leadership; this hardly produces better quality teachers.

Instead of encouraging - or even allowing time off - to every teacher to study educational management, we need to change focus to strengthening content competencies. Even for primary school teachers, we need an increasing proportion who are qualified scientists, economists, accountants, historians, and geographers.

I recognise that taking a primary school teacher who has never done chemistry or physics in his life, through a degree level course in chemistry or physics is a tall order. What can be done - and surely must be done - is to take all teachers through continuing education programmes. Continuing education (CE) or professional development training (PTD) programmes are essential for teachers - and for all professions.

Government has recently put in place the *Fiji Teachers Registration Promulgation, 2008*. This allows for authorities to set the conditions for teacher registration and renewals of the registrations. This can become an effective mechanism through which CE/PTD can be built into the teaching profession. Under s19, which makes provision for renewal of registration, Government can make CE/PTD a mandatory element for renewal of registration. Thus, a condition for renewal of registration could be certain hours of formal participation in programmes aimed at maintaining competencies current, for example English language, IT tools, subject/content, and teaching methods. The challenge is also for the teacher bodies and teaching fraternity to accept that the work of a teacher does not start and end in the classrooms at the school compounds. For the profession to gain greater respect, the professionals must also behave like those others which command respect - like medical, legal, engineering, accounting, etc.

Instruction/Learning Time

A critical factor in student achievement, *ceteris paribus*, is the time devoted to 'instruction'/teaching the prescribed materials.

Fiji has a 41 week academic year. Generally the first week is devoted to organizing school work; one school - the Government owned Natabua Secondary - does not start Form 6 classes until the third week and Form 7 classes until the fourth week of the first term. For exam forms, all time after the final exams are also non-learning weeks; For Form 7, this is the last 4 weeks of the terms. Thus, the effective instruction time in secondary schools range from 33 to 35 weeks (compare Rus-

sia, 43 weeks, and India, 42 weeks). Primary school learning weeks average 38. For both, there are six days of statutory holidays per year.

In terms of daily instruction time, for most primary schools class time is from 8.45am to 3pm, with 15 minutes for morning recess, and 1 hour for lunch. Effectively, therefore the instruction time is 5 hrs per day. For the year, the instruction time available is, on average, 920 hours.

For secondary schools, class times are from 8.20am to 3.20pm with 20 minutes morning recess and 40 minutes lunch. This produces 6 hours per day instruction time. Annually, the effective instruction time is 984 hours.

A challenging issue is whether even these times are adhered to by all schools. It is widely speculated that in most schools, the curriculum is not completed during the academic year, and labs/workshops are not held. The reality is that students miss considerable learning times through early school breaks, which is a notable occurrence in a number of primary schools, absenteeism of teachers, unfilled positions, extra curricular activities (like sports), and the routine breaks due to natural disasters. Sick leave exhaustion is a norm for teachers; this itself reduces effective instruction time by, on average, 50 hours per year. All other factors would collectively result in the loss of another 50 hours of instruction time at the minimum. These leave the effective instruction time in Fiji to 820 hours for primary schools and 880 hours for secondary schools.

The more critical issue for policy makers, and for the teaching profession, is whether these instruction times are adequate for Fiji. Effective instruction time is a critical issue for all countries. Some comparative statistics would be instructive:

- In Malaysia, effective instruction time is 964 hours per year upto 11 years, and 1230 hours for over 12 years;
- In Sri Lanka, the effective instruction time is 1083 hours per year;
- In New Zealand, the effective instruction time is 985 hours for primary, 968 hours for lower secondary, and 950 for upper secondary;
- In the USA, the effective instruction time is 1080 hours (see: UNESCO Global Education Digest, 2010, tables 20-21).

As can be seen, Fiji features worse than all the countries cited above. With the move towards internal assessment, this becomes a major matter of concern. With declining effective instruction time, and lack of satisfactory time management details for delivery of curriculum, learning times, and internal assessment tasks, Fijian education is up for a major chal-

lenge. Detailed research in this area is a matter of high priority.

Resources

The National President has outlined some of the resource challenges. I want to pick up on two points. One of them has to do with the student-teacher ratio.

On average, Fiji is among the leading countries in the world in terms of student-teacher ratios. The figures, on average, are as follows: for primary school, 25 pupils per teacher and for secondary, 16 students per teacher. This compares very well with a number of other countries. But these figures are averages only. The real challenge is the very large student: teacher ratio in many schools. I cannot recall any national policy on the maximum number of students that should be in a classroom. I do note that the 1993 job evaluation exercise had given a guideline. The current average is way better than the guideline. My suggestion is that there be a policy on each and every classroom, and where a school has more students per teacher than the guideline, additional teachers need to be posted there.

But there is also another issue. The whole idea of monitoring student/teacher ratio is based on the belief that fewer students per teacher would lead to better quality. If that were true then the hundreds of schools where the student/teacher ratios are well below the national average must have students that would be doing extremely well. Is that the case? I suggest that this matter be examined by the teachers, the unions and the Ministry.

Until recently, the major challenge in the education sector was the cost of textbooks. Commendably, the Government has taken over the responsibility of providing textbooks to schools.

The challenge on textbooks, however, remain. This challenge has to do with the quality of textbooks. There are many levels and subjects in which we lack quality resources for students. These need to be developed. Development of quality resources needs to be prioritized by the Ministry. This matter relates to the quality of staffing in the Curriculum Development Unit, already discussed above. Fiji has a more than adequate stock of human capital to produce best quality educational resources for primary and secondary schools.

Other resource costs include overhead, school libraries (both capital and operating costs), school building maintenance, land lease/rental negotiation and rates, statutory payments like municipal rates, NFA, OHS, etc., levies, and capital purchases (equipment, furniture, etc). To cover

these, annually the Government provides an operating grant to each school, and occasionally a capital grant to selected schools whose capital projects are approved and/or accepted by the Ministry. The operating grant formula specifies grants on different levels. The rates are \$30 per primary school student, and \$90/student for forms 1 and 2, \$153/student for forms 3 and 4, \$165/student for forms 5 and 6, and \$240/student for form 7. This money is to take care of school utilities and general administration expenses. Annually government provides a total of \$15m as operating grants to schools; this is an average of \$5,400 for primary schools and \$60,000 for secondary schools per year. This sum looks considerably small to meet all the non-salary costs of the 721 primary, 176 secondary, 2 vocational and 17 special schools in Fiji.

Management

Fiji is perhaps the only country in the world where we have a partnership where the state takes responsibility for the academic aspects of primary and secondary education (specifically the development of curriculum and standards, delivery of the curriculum, and examinations and assessments), while NGOs take the responsibility of physical infrastructure and capital development. This partnership has found a firm footing after independence in 1970. It's a laudable partnership; we would not have been able to make the progress we have made in Education without such a partnership.

But within that partnership is always the issue of managing the partnership tensions. Almost every senior teacher here would have stories to tell about how school managers think that the school is 'theirs', and that they can have teachers who they want, or manage school accounts as they wish to. Such tensions have seen many occasions where lock-outs and lock-ins have taken place, and education delivery disrupted. Often also, schools remain deprived of quality teachers because school building managers have other ideas about delivering education. This challenge needs to be firmly managed. FNU has offered the Ministry the opportunity of running training programmes for managers and senior teachers; like the proposal on training programmes for school inspectors, this proposal has remained formally unacknowledged.

OHS

Managing occupational health and safety issues for schools is a considerable challenge. The Ministry's policy - *Policy in [sic] Occupa-*

tional Health and Safety in MOE Offices and Schools and the accompanying *Occupational Health and Safety Manual for Schools* - are to be followed by all schools. This policy is quite onerous on schools. The relevance of the policy as is for schools needs to be continuously reviewed at both, the Ministry and the institution level. What concerns me is that most schools, urban ones in particular, have taken the easy way out and now do not even allow students to engage in sports during lunch breaks, or allow the students use of the school grounds after school hours. Yet fundamental issues - like students being made to clean toilets, classrooms, blackboards and school compounds as a regular activity - remain unaddressed. It is time now that these responsibilities, particularly cleaning toilets and classrooms, be taken away from students.

Discipline

There are four critical areas relating to discipline - these are behaviour management, counselling, bullying, and teacher-student relationships.

Behaviour management: I was advised that only recently this year in one particular school - Labasa Sangam - a senior student came with a hangover and assaulted a teacher; the student continued to remain at school. There was no disciplinary action taken because the behaviour management policy is too onerous for teachers to implement. This, therefore, poses a major challenge for the teaching profession. Students now are exposed to popular media. Most parents are also better educated than parents of the past. There is also an 'air' around students which teachers need to manage. This is not going to be an easy task. Ultimately, where parental responsibilities fail, or where poor parenting leads to anti-social behaviour, the burden falls on the schools and the teachers. The ideal would be that every teacher also be a counsellor, a mentor and a guide. Unfortunately our education curriculum was not designed to create teachers as well as counsellors. Some reforms in the education curriculum at tertiary level will see that happening.

Bullying: This is not a new phenomenon in Fiji. Bullying happens in every school. Teachers need to keep their eyes open and read the signs of bullying. They have to be perceptive. They should be able to see a child and figure out what is bothering them. Bullying can become a serious reason for self destruction of students. It's a challenge that needs to be ad-

ressed. Bullying is not confined to students bullying students; it extends to teachers bullying students, and students bullying teachers; there are a number of cases where teachers have quipped that students from certain professional backgrounds of parents have threatened them when they demand performance. These are matters that need to be brought up formally, discussed and resolved.

Teacher-Student Relationships: Such relationships are of various types. While that of greatest concern is sexual relationships between male teachers and female students, equally serious are those between female teachers and male students, homosexual relationships between teachers and students, sexual or homosexual relationships between teachers and trainee teachers, and even social relationships. The latter includes students being asked to tend to housework for teachers, or to social events like mixing and/or serving kava or drinks to teachers at their homes on in their functions. Such relationships have no place in schools. The challenge for school administrators and the ministry is to manage the schools in such a way that ensures that relationships are now developed; included in this is clear and regular counselling of teachers and students. The last stop, of course, is firm disciplinary action.

Counselling: Counselling is a matter which concerns teachers on a daily basis. Counselling is at different levels. Often a majority of student activities are, potentially, within the scope of counselling by teachers. This includes bad behaviour, bullying, and preventing development of teacher-student relationships. For the teachers already in the profession, renewal of registration must be made conditional on teachers going through basic counselling courses. For new teachers, teacher training institutions must be asked to include basic counselling in the training programme.

Policy Development

Policies are important for order and functioning of institutions. The Ministry has a number of policies in place. An important challenge in this area is to avoid the temptation to copy and paste sections or whole documents from other contexts. Every policy - from curriculum development to behaviour management in schools; from grant allocation to mark scaling, and from health and safety to substance abuse - need to be developed in the context of Fiji. The standard requirements of consultation with stakeholders, communication with stakeholders, training for implementation, etc., are normally well done by the Ministry. What continues to be a challenge is the technical capacity to deal with the subject matter, particu-

larly founding new policies or revising existing ones on the basis of thorough research. In the latter, neither the unions nor the Ministry has shown much aptitude. Policy making needs to be fed by research findings. My call is for both, the Ministry and the Unions, to boost their research capacities.

Performance Management System

Currently there is no clear performance management system in the Ministry. Beginner teachers start at the following rounded salaries: \$12,000 for Certificate holders; \$14,000 for diploma holders and \$19,000 for degree holders. The teachers are stuck to these levels irrespective of performance until promoted to HOD positions. Incentives to innovate and take an additional step to improve learning and/or teaching and/or the general environment, are non-existent. There is no sustained motivation for teachers to advance the knowledge base they have, and the general educational achievements of students. As noted earlier, sick leave exhaustion has become a norm in the service.

The challenge for stakeholders is to put in place a quality PMS, which rewards meritorious teachers, and penalizes those whose performances are below par. This, particularly the latter, requires courage and will to make the teaching profession accountable for outcomes. Intricately, mentoring is part of this process. Education in Fiji will progress rapidly if we began to mentor the weaker teachers. Mentoring the high performers (adjudged by such indicators as GPAs in their studies, continuing education outcomes, student results in external assessments compared to the students results at commencement of their studies – all of which are quantitative indicators), to achieve yet higher levels of performances and achievements is also critically important. This will create a profession which would remain a first choice profession for people, and the prospect for growth and intellectual stimulation would begin to attract better and brighter teachers. Business as usual will not help alleviate the malaise we see in the teaching profession.

In-Service Training

In-service training is a part of professional development of employees. For this, the Ministry is renown. However, what is lacking is consistency in funding teachers. Some teachers get selected for in-service training - under which all their fees are paid by the Ministry and they continue to get their salaries while on leave from work - while a vast majority are

left to fend for themselves. The majority study on a part-time basis without any support from the Ministry. This status needs to be changed to one where the staff and the Ministry share the cost of qualification upgrades. One likely approach is for the individuals to be allowed to study for upgrades at their own costs, with the Ministry paying for the last term of their study under the in-service training scheme for those who maintain consistent grade targets in the respective fields pre-set by the Ministry.

Teachers and unions need to ask the Ministry to chart qualification upgrade charts for each teacher in the service. This would include the subjects to be undertaken, the mode of study, the target grades, and the progression schedules. The Ministry also needs to make clear announcements that renewal of teacher registrations would be conditional upon steady progress towards qualification upgrades.

School-Teacher-Parent Interactions

A very useful feature of education in Fiji is the regular opportunity parents are provided to discuss the progress of their child with the teachers. This feature needs to be strengthened - to one where a once per term opportunity to discuss progress would be available, while those who seek greater opportunities should be enabled. However, the challenge is in keeping pace with technology and development. Modern society is quite densely populated with latest technology as well as parents with demanding employment, employment at significant distances from their homes, and work schedules which may not avail them to the conveniences of school timetables. Newer and technology enabled means need to be considered. One example could be maintaining a mobile phone, email and social media database of all parents, and reporting through electronic means. Interaction between parents and teachers electronically must now become part of the norm. A significant advance, with relatively insignificant costs, would be a small database where attendances are marked and parents are flagged within hours in cases of child absences.

School leaders must keep up with technology. For leadership positions, competency with electronic technology would now need to be made a part of the minimum qualification requirement (MQR). Teachers and unions must now accept that the old ways of doing things are of the past.

The National Question

One of the most critical aspects of Fiji is its multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature. The diversity of Fiji cannot be wished

away. Such an environment calls for greater tolerance, and the cultivation of an ethos of living together. Teachers and the education system need to play the most critical role in this regard. Engaging with the 'national question', therefore, is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for the teaching profession and the education section.

Language competencies where every teacher has basic communication competencies in each of the major languages in Fiji - English, iTaukei and Hindi - is absolutely fundamental to forging a united society. The ministry has already made language competencies compulsory for students. It has, however, yet to decree this for the teachers. The teaching profession, however, need not wait to be directed; it can resolve, on its own, to ensure that every member endorses this need and takes steps to achieve these outcomes.

The Government has taken a number of critical steps, including school zoning and renaming, which are important in creating a united Fiji. The challenge is for the teachers to make this work. Casual evidences, however, indicate that many teachers are at the forefront advising the management on ways to undermine and/or oppose the zoning and renaming initiatives.

Personal and Professional Challenges

Teaching Career

Until recent times, and even now, trainee teachers were almost guaranteed employment as teachers. One of the safest options for many people until recent times was to become a teacher. Failure rates from teaching programmes were extremely low, jobs were guaranteed, and a promotion system in place which recognized nothing but years of service.

Things are rapidly changing now. During this decade the employment market for teachers will be thoroughly overhauled. This year the FNU has had an all-time high enrolment in its teaching programmes. In two to three years, there will be a huge pool of potential teachers in the market. The employer - the Ministry - would have a large pool of teachers to select from. While the current practice is for the Ministry to prioritize sponsored students for employment, this state is unlikely to continue. In time, only the best in the profession would be selected for employment in the teaching profession. Likewise, only the best are expected to prosper in the profession through career progression and commensurate recognition and rewards.

I suggest that the above is an immensely positive development for

parents, students, employers, and indeed the education sector. Those in the profession now must, therefore, prepare for stiff competition in years not too far to come.

One of the most important ways of this preparation is professional development. It is important that those teachers who do not have Bachelor level qualifications, aim to attain these. The National University will ensure that its Bachelor of Education programmes are made available throughout Fiji; teachers would not need to leave their towns and cities for long periods to complete their degrees. Another integral part of professional development is continuing education. This takes many forms, of which a time-tested and effective means is regular conferences and seminars, where thoroughly researched papers are presented by researchers for the benefit of colleagues. This professional development culture has yet to be embraced by the teaching profession in Fiji. It is my strong suggestion that the teachers deliberate on this, and propose that researching and writing papers, and participating in professional development seminars and conferences, be made one part of the condition for continuing registration of teachers under the FTRB. Other than these, teachers must start taking initiatives to benefit from the enormous and ever increasing volume of open access materials on the internet. Arming oneself with the modern tools of the trade - a computer and internet connection at homes - is now not a luxury; it has become a necessity. Those refusing to move with the time would find themselves squeezed out of the profession - for the better, may I add.

Undertaking the activities proposed above would no doubt prepare teachers to meet the challenges to each individual teacher in the coming decade. But this is not only aimed at empowering teachers with the tools necessary to meet the challenges of the future; it is also aimed at improving the quality of education that Fiji would be delivering to its youngsters. For, it is in continuing improvements to the education system and the curriculum, always informed by the needs to the times and improving knowledge and technology, that Fiji's future developments rest.

Retirement and Security

Since the Government announced the reduction in retirement age from 60 to 55 years, intense discussions have taken place on the merits and demerits of this. There are two major perspectives - one from the personal welfare perspective of the individual being retired, and the other on the impact of this on education in Fiji. Naturally, an earlier retirement would reduce the income stream to the date of retirement, thus adversely

affecting the individual employee.

From the education point of view, in the present environment, where there has been no continuing education and professional development after teachers obtained their qualifications – which may have been a number of years in the past – teachers have remained out of touch with the reality of advancement in both knowledge and technology. Given this, they are likely to be unable to meet the challenges which students and stakeholders would demand from aging teachers. Until the matter of continuous development of technical/subject competencies is positively resolved, a retirement age of 55 years is acceptable for the students and parents. The infusion of new blood, with new ideas, current with developments and technology, in place of the older rusting teachers can only be a positive development. If teachers wish the public to support a higher retirement age proposal, then initiatives must come from them on ensuring that teachers maintain currency in the competencies. The cases of art teachers who teach only macramé as that was the only thing they learnt and only thing they knew; or the complete chaos in a class of computer literate students generated by the stenographer teacher of the past given responsibility to teach computing in the present environment, are but only some of the evidences leading to mass support by students and parents for a lower retirement age. This reality needs to be faced head-on by the teachers and the unions.

For the moment, the challenge is not in challenging the decision on retirement age, but in preparing for a productive life after 55 years. Security of livelihood is a critical matter, particularly where with modern medicine and awareness, there would be at least 10 to 15 years of healthy and productive life remaining for those retiring at 55 years. What is required is both, proper financial planning from early in ones working career, as well as being trained, and getting mentally attuned to a new vocation after 55. Life does not need to end at 55. Self employment and working in the private sector are relatively easy transitions for those who are prepared for these. And a majority of those who have made these transitions have often, quite publicly, expressed regret at dragging on in the service for as long as they did. In this context, I commend the FTU for its investments in productive ventures and allowing members to retain shares in these investments as long as they like to. I encourage the FTU to increase productive investments and provide share certificates which members can trade in the market. That is one way to provide financial security to members after retirement.

Attitude and Ethics

For the education sector a great challenge concerns the attitude and work ethics of teachers. My head of HR always states that a correct attitude to the office, the profession and the work contributes to at least 80% of a person's and an office's success. Winston Churchill's famous quip - 'attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference' - is most apt. How teachers evaluate and respond to their workplaces, their professions, their careers, their environment, and how they respond to people, responsibilities, policies, supervisors, juniors, students, management, ministry officials and policy makers, etc., all create the conditions for both, the success/failure of the individual teacher as well as the student in his/her tutorship.

Whether attitude is a learnt behavior from the tertiary institutions, or a product of the wider environment, the attitude of teachers, coupled with lack of apparent widespread passion and ethical conduct, have challenged school managements, the ministry and the mothers and fathers of students.

It is time now for the teaching profession, and the unions, to make this a leading agenda in their discussions. Resolutions on self reflection and steps to improve on these would be a hugely welcomed step.

Conclusion

Let me conclude: Challenges to the teaching profession in this decade will be numerous. We need to recognise that the challenges that we have now are far different from the challenges teachers and the profession have had 30, 60 or 120 years back. But challenges they still are. Challenges are, after all, what must make life potentially interesting. This holds generally, and to the teaching profession more specifically. For, teachers create the future of the country. And no one can make a better future without facing serious challenges and resolving them.

The challenges I have listed are just some of those which I believe, on the basis of my research, my experiences and my observations, are critical ones which the collective - the individual teacher, the body of teachers, the unions, the ministry, and all education stakeholders - need to acknowledge as real, and deal with systematically. Trade unions are important stakeholders in this process.

Fiji is an impressively literate society in that almost all people can read and write, and most can speak at least two languages. We have a good education infrastructure. For all these, our teachers must be given

due credit. Amongst you here today are some of the best teachers we have had in recent years. Our collective challenge is to make you even better, and to lift those who are lagging behind to become the best teachers. The challenge is to restore the dignity of the profession.

With these remarks, I declare the 82nd annual conference open. I wish you well in your deliberations over the next couple of days and every success with your conference outcomes.

Author

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