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Of Special Interest

Primary School Libraries in Fiji: A Research Report

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A survey of primary school libraries in Fiji found that unsuitable facilities, lack of library training, and inadequate collections make it difficult for staff to provide adequate library services. The situation is worse in rural schools than in urban ones, and most respondents expressed the need for more material support and training.

Introduction: Schools In Fiji

Fiji has several types of schools: committee-run schools, religious schools, government schools, and private schools. Of the 709 primary schools in the country, 695 are managed by committees (*Fiji Times*, December 24, 1997). Committee schools may be set up by a religious group. For example, there are many schools run by particular Hindu groups or sects. Christian denominations such as Methodist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, and Assemblies of God churches also have schools throughout the country. As well, schools organized and managed by Muslim communities are found in many parts of the two major islands. In some parts of the country, one finds community schools that are not affiliated with any religious groups. There are also a few schools that are financed by and completely under government control, and there are a few private schools. The largest of these is the International School in Suva. Although schools are managed by religious groups or committees, they are interracial, intersocial, and interreligious by law. There are no set school boundaries to which parents must adhere; thus parents have the right to send their children to any school they wish.

In government-run schools, the government is responsible for providing buildings and for funding the upkeep of the schools. All schools, with the exception of the International Schools, receive a subsidy of \$30.00 per student per year, which is used to purchase materials and resources for classrooms. Any other money that is required by the schools must be raised by the schools. Schools can apply for aid from the Ministry of Education to build new classrooms, toilet blocks, a bus shelter, or canteen, or for improving the school compound. An application form must be completed, but that in itself does not mean aid will be forthcoming. In any given year, there may be a

considerable number of applicants, and school committees may find their applications have not been approved.

With the exception of the International Schools, schools cannot charge fees. However, schools carry out fund raising activities, and parents are required to pay a school building or maintenance fee each year. Fee structures vary from school to school and the amount charged may be by individual child or by family. Fundraising may be for any number of specific projects, including the purchase of sports equipment team uniforms, science equipment, library books, or building a library. In the last few years, there have been many complaints from parents about the amount of time spent on fund raising.

Although most teachers are part of the Civil Service, there is also a group known as grant-in-aid teachers. These are teachers hired on a yearly basis if they are needed, and as positions open in the Civil Service, they are taken in on a quota basis. Since the military coups of 1987, there has been a consistent shortage of qualified teachers, as many of the better qualified teachers migrated overseas, mainly to Australia and New Zealand. Today, the shortage of qualified teachers is still a serious problem.

Class enrollments, particularly in urban centers, are large. A Fiji Teachers' Union study showed that 80% of the urban schools had more than 50 students in each class, making teaching extremely difficult (*Fiji Times*, May I, 1998, p. 1).

Examinations have always played an important role in the education systems throughout the South Pacific. National examinations are written at various levels in both primary and secondary schools. A good school is judged not just by the number of passes in the national examinations, but on the number of A grade passes it receives. Teaching for the purpose of passing examinations does not require well-stocked libraries and qualified teacher librarians who work closely with students and teachers. The textbook, chalkboard, a good set of notes, and a teacher who drills students on facts are all that is required for a reasonable degree of success in many schools.

Purpose of the Study

In 1978-1979, a survey of primary and secondary school libraries was carried out by Ragni (1979) for the Ministry of Education. Ragni found the basic problems facing libraries were lack of budgets, lack of trained staff small collections, and lack of space. However, Ragni was generally positive in his remarks about the growing interest in the development of libraries. A study of secondary school libraries in Fiji was carried out by Rainey in 1991. The study found that the number of secondary school libraries had increased, but the problems that were revealed by Ragni's study were still largely unsolved. The purpose of this study was to update Ragni's work by examining the state of libraries in primary schools in Fiji.

Methodology

In 1994, a questionnaire was sent to 340 primary (elementary) schools with enrollments of more than 175 students. Enrollment figures were based on the 1993 school rolls. Fifteen of the 340 schools in Fiji indicated enrollment of fewer than 175 and were excluded from the study. Of the total 325 schools, 245 answered the questionnaire, giving a 75% rate of return. Of these, 158 were rural and 87 were urban.

The questionnaire included questions about: school enrollment; number of teachers; whether the school had a centralized library, classroom collections, or no library facilities; and whether the centralized library had the basic library furnishings. It also asked whether there was a person in charge of the library, what percentage of time the person spent in the library, and whether library staff had any specialized training. A section of the questionnaire covered collection development, size and age of the collection, and budget. The last part of the questionnaire asked about planning and team teaching by the librarian and classroom teachers. This section also asked whether special activities such as storytelling, book discussions, and story reading were carried out in the library. Respondents were also asked to make any comments they felt that were relevant to their particular situations.

Analysis of the Survey Results

Library Facilities

Respondents were asked whether their school had a separate room for the library at least the size of a regular classroom. If there was no separate room, they were asked if the school had classroom collections. The 245 schools were almost evenly divided on whether there was a centralized library: 125 (51 %) did have a separate room for the library. More than half of the 120 schools (74, or 61 %) without a centralized library had classroom collections. The real concern is that the remaining 46 schools had no library of any kind.

The questionnaire did not attempt to divide schools into rural and urban areas; however, these data were added with the help of the Library Service of Fiji after the questionnaires were returned. Of the 245 schools who answered the questionnaire, 158 schools were in rural areas. These included most of the schools without a library.

Basic Equipment

In those schools that have libraries, basic equipment such as tables and chairs, shelving, circulation (issue desk), card catalogue, and storage area for pictures and audiovisual materials is often lacking. For example, 49% of the school libraries had not enough tables or chairs to seat at least 30 students at one time. Slightly fewer than one third had insufficient shelving, roughly half had no circulation desk, and just over 60% had no storage area for pictures, maps, or audiovisual items. It was interesting to note that close to 80% of the schools had either a duplicator or photocopy machine. Many of

the urban schools have a simple catalogue, although most of them are in poor condition. In many instances, they have not been kept up to date. Although the questionnaire did not ask about computer catalogues, to the best of my knowledge only three schools in Fiji have a computerized collection.

Library Staff

More than half (55%) of the 245 schools had a person in charge of the library, but most of these spent less than half, and usually less than 25%, of their time in the library.

Although 84% of the people in charge of the library are qualified teachers, only 4% have both teacher training and library training. Of the staff without teacher training, only 3% have a certificate or diploma in librarianship or are presently enrolled in a library training program. At present, there is no provision in the education system that states schools must have libraries that are managed by qualified people. There is no attempt by schools to cut back on time a teacher spends in the classroom so that he or she could spend more time in the library.

In most cases, the school committee allows the school to hire someone in the community, often someone who has not completed secondary school and who can be paid a mere pittance to look after the library. Failing this, the office staff are expected to look after the library.

Budgets

As the secondary schools study found in 1991, the budget for primary (elementary) school libraries is woefully inadequate. Of the 199 schools that responded to the question asking whether they had a library budget, 139 (70%) had no regular budget to buy library materials. It is easy to understand why collections are in a disastrous state in a large majority of the schools.

Few children's books are published in Fiji, or for that matter in the South Pacific. The Ministry of Education produces textbooks and workbooks for a variety of subjects in the primary schools, but virtually all storybooks, picture books, information books on topics like dinosaurs, space, magnets, earthquakes, or volcanoes, and encyclopedias, dictionaries, and yearbooks are imported. The recent 20% devaluation of the Fiji dollar in 1998, plus the high cost of shipping and the need for booksellers to have some margin of profit, mean that an extremely small number of books can be purchased by most schools.

Collection Development

Insufficient budgets make it impossible to do an adequate job of developing the collection. Roughly three quarters of the schools surveyed rely mainly on gifts for new acquisitions. Gifts come to schools mainly through overseas service clubs, public libraries, and schools. Most of the gifts are discards, and although some material is useful, much of it is of little use. A large part of

collections in general cover topics that deal with environments and situations that have little meaning for students.

The questionnaire asked for an estimate of the relative age of the collection. Dates were given by decades. Two thirds of the respondents estimated that the bulk of their collection was more than 20 years old. Students are often given projects on a great variety of topics, for example, hurricanes, dinosaurs, the sugarcane industry, space, or gold mining. If their school library does not have much material and they live close to a public library, they are told to use it to find some material. Unfortunately, collections in public libraries are in much the same condition as those in school libraries. Only a small minority of students, primarily in urban areas, are likely to have access to reasonably up-to-date sources.

Three other questions asked about the collection were: Does the reading level of the materials in your collection generally meet the reading needs of students? Does your library / school have a set of encyclopedias that was new within the last 10 years? Does your library have a children's dictionary and a children's atlas?

A total of 79% of the respondents found that material in their collections did not meet the students' reading needs. There are several reasons why this is so, but probably the major reason is that English is the second and sometimes the third language of children in Fiji, and collections are predominantly in English. There is a great need for works, especially popular titles, to be translated into the vernacular. As well, the writing of storybooks, text books, and reference books in the first languages of Fijian children has been neglected for far too long and action needs to be taken to improve the situation. The government does publish and reprint textbooks and workbooks for schools, but in many cases the content is badly outdated. The Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific has made a valiant attempt to publish short, simple children's stories that are meaningful for children, but unfortunately the demand is much greater than the Institute is able to meet.

The question that asked whether the school had a set of encyclopedias that was new within the past 10 years was answered by 238 schools, or 97% of the total number. A total of 86% of the schools answered that they did not have a new set of encyclopedias within the last 10 years. In fact, a large number of the schools said they had never had an encyclopedia in the school.

The second part of the question asked for the name of the encyclopedia if the school had one. Overall, 18 sets were named. *World Book* was cited by 45% of the respondents, *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Colliers* by 11% and 9% respectively, and a specialized set called *Growing up with Science* was cited by 7%. It was something of a shock to see *Colliers* and *Britannica* being used in primary schools. The name *Britannica* carries much prestige in South Pacific countries, and when schools have money to purchase an encyclopedia they often buy *Britannica*, even when they are cautioned about the level of writing,

amount of content the lack of large colored illustrations, and the lack of ease in using the encyclopedia.

The last question in the section covering the collection asked if the collection contained a children's dictionary and a children's atlas. Overwhelmingly, the answers were No, 67% and 73% respectively. Perhaps this was not a good question to ask, because most children are required to purchase a paperback dictionary, and in some schools they are asked to purchase an atlas as part of their required texts.

Library Services/Programs

The last section of the questionnaire asked about basic services: Does the library have scheduled classes on a weekly basis? Are skimming for information and note taking, using an index, and using a dictionary taught by the librarian, by the classroom teacher, or do the librarian and classroom teacher work together as a team to teach these basic skills? Does the librarian read to the children on a regular basis? Do the librarian and the classroom teacher together plan projects or assignments so that students have to use resources in the library or community to complete the assignment?

To the first question, 63% of those who answered replied they did have regularly scheduled library classes. Schools that had classroom collections said there was one library period per week where children read. In the schools with centralized libraries, the students used the library period to do homework or read.

Answers to the questions on developing basic skills indicated that little has been done in either the library or the classroom. Where these skills were taught they were taught by the classroom teacher.

The answers to the question "Does the librarian read to the children on a regular basis?" indicated that 85% of the library staff did not read to children. Roughly 30% of the respondents added that teachers read to students, and in three cases the respondents stated that the entire school stopped work for 15-20 minutes every day and everybody read during this period. This is certainly to be commended, as it is important for students to see their teachers reading. Younger children are more likely to respond positively because of the role the teacher plays in their lives.

The librarian and classroom teacher together planned projects or assignments that require students to use the library in fewer than 10% of the 245 school surveyed.

Comments by Respondents

Schools were given an opportunity at the end of the questionnaire to add any comments they wished. One hundred schools did this, and 80% of those were rural schools. Many of them restated the problems the study identified, such as lack of a regular library budget and small and outdated collections. One respondent mentioned that the school was able to buy some library books through the efforts of the teachers, who run a school canteen and sell

vegetable garden produce. Other schools mentioned fund raising through "walkathons." A large number of teachers from rural schools that did not have a library of any kind stated that students in the upper classes were at a great disadvantage when they moved into secondary school. A considerable number of schools commented on the lack of support from the Library Service of Fiji. Some respondents alleged that letters had been written asking the Library Service for support in setting up the library, which either went unanswered or, if help was promised, it never materialized. Overall, one could not help but feel that the general morale in regard to libraries was at a low ebb. A number of schools mentioned the need for workshops to be offered to teachers who are in charge of libraries and for classroom teachers on how to use the library with their classes.

The teachers wished to know not only about the management of the library, but also the kinds of activities they should be carrying out with students. In a few cases, schools complained about the lack of training programs for librarians. In 1995-1996, a blanket mailing of the University of the South Pacific's Diploma in Library /Information Studies Program brochure was sent to all schools. A 1997 mailing went to all university centers in the region. Before the beginning of every semester, the programs are advertised in the newspapers in each of the 12 countries that make up the University region. This notification does not appear to be sufficient, and we must consider other ways of informing those in the field.

Conclusion

For many reasons, school libraries in Fiji are not able to play the important role they should have in the education of children. As the results of this study show, the lack of staff training, inadequate and, in many cases, nonexistent budgets, outdated and small collections, and lack of suitable space and equipment are basic problems that must be resolved if school libraries are to play a positive and effective role in education.

Since Ragni's study in 1979, school libraries at the primary level have increased in number. However, for the great majority, the standard is poor if we accept the findings of this study. Sixty-four percent of the schools that answered the questionnaire were rural schools, and although nearly all primary schools are lacking good facilities and collections, it is the rural schools that are at the greatest disadvantage.

Although it is obvious the problems are many, they are not insurmountable. Many talented professionals in the field of education and libraries are willing and able to play an important and active role in bringing about change. Teachers and librarians must take a proactive role in pressing forward the need for better libraries. We must convince those in our profession who believe there is no hope that they are wrong. We must convince school committees and parents that change must come if we are to move into the 21st century with any hope of improving and meeting the new challenges

that will face us. Finally, we must convince our leaders, the Ministry of Education, that they have a leadership role to play and that we are there to support them. We cannot afford to short-change our children's education if we hope to prepare them to be good citizens and leaders of their community and country.

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