

*Pushpa Lal*

**Editor's note:**

*This article arose out of a small survey conducted by Pushpa Lal, a lecturer in Education at the University of the South Pacific. She went to several Suva and Nausori schools primarily to visit her USP teacher trainees on the school experience part of their course. However, on observing classes taught by 'BEMTUP teachers' she was impressed by the materials and methods they used, and decided to interview the teachers in order to find out more.*

*For readers who are unfamiliar with BEMTUP, the article begins with some background information.*

**What is BEMTUP?**

BEMTUP is an acronym for the project title Basic Education Management and Teacher Upgrading Programme. It is funded by the Fiji and Australian Governments and operated by Griffith University in association with the University of Wollongong (Faculty of Education), the New South Wales Department of School Education and the University of the South Pacific (Institute of Education).

BEMTUP is located at the Fiji College of Advanced Education compound in one of the wooden buildings formerly occupied by the Nasinu Teachers' College Industrial Arts section.

While this article focusses on the Teacher Upgrading Programme, it is worth noting that the BEMTUP team has completed an upgrading in the Ministry of Education's Research and Development Department, which included facilitating and providing the data base for the Ministry's statistics, and training staff to use it. This is a very valuable resource.

**Teacher Upgrading Programme**

The year Seven and Eight Teacher Upgrading Programme is designed to improve the skills and knowledge of these teachers to enable them to implement the new prescriptions in English, Mathematics, Basic Science and Social Science which have been recently developed by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of the Ministry of Education. These prescriptions are characterised by a constructivist approach to learning, and by an emphasis on cognitive processes.

The upgrading programme was designed by BEMTUP specialist advisers and sixteen teachers, four for each subject, who were seconded from schools. They were assisted by CDU officers. The programme design seeks to:

- assure access and equity in provision
- provide consistency in communication
- integrate workshops, coursework, assessment, feedback and support
- develop pedagogical understandings and skills relevant to the new prescriptions
- recognise participating teachers as adults and professionals
- feature classroom based activity and learning
- encourage reflection on reading and in-classroom activity
- model teaching and learning skills
- reflect a constructivist approach to learning
- incorporate flexibility in involvement, timing and progression
- assure sustainability

There is an integration of two residential workshops, each of three weeks' duration, and five distance education modules, each of one term's duration. These include audio tapes, radio broadcasts, in-classroom assessment activities and feedback, school visits and support from the BEMTUP centre.

The residential workshops are conducted in the first three weeks of teachers' December/January holidays at four locations, each serving a Division. They were originally planned and implemented by BEMTUP subject specialist advisers and by counterpart teachers, but are now run largely by the counterpart teachers. Staff of CDU and divisional and district officers of the Ministry of Education also participate.

The first distance education module provides an introduction to the programme, its modes of learning and the in-classroom planning, teaching, assessment and reflective activity to be undertaken by the participating teachers. The four subsequent modules address the teaching and learning of English, Social Science, Mathematics and Basic Science using the new prescriptions and available resources, including pupil texts and teacher's guides.

#### **BEMTUP's Link with Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC)**

Links with LTC are vital in that they enable pre-service teachers to work with a programme that is similar to that offered to in-service teachers through BEMTUP. It is worth noting that BEMTUP advisers and LTC staff have worked collaboratively to revise LTC upper primary methods courses in the four subject areas and to offer professional development to members of various departments at the college. This effort results in the BEMTUP programme having much broader reach, eventually to all the primary schools of Fiji.

#### **About the English Language Programme**

The BEMTUP English language materials used by Classes 7 and 8 have brought about a change from a teacher-centred classroom to a child-centred classroom. The varied teaching techniques and the types of activities cater for all abilities of the children. The teaching/learning strategies such as radio talk-back shows, role-plays, word webs and puppetry in this Whole Language Approach to teaching/learning English enhance students enjoyment of learning. There is an integration

of the four macro skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing.

#### **Survey Findings**

These findings are based on interviews with three teachers, BEMTUP trained. While this is admittedly a very small number, their responses give some indication of views about the BEMTUP programme content, the resources, the activities, and the training.

The conclusions listed below summarise their comments, both about the programme's good points and their own feelings about using this approach, and how it compares with what they were doing before.

- The teachers are very pleased with the BEMTUP modules that contain a series of approaches and techniques that show how contexts, or meaning frameworks, can be created and exploited in Classes 7 and 8.
- They liked the way the programme suggests how teachers can use resources in various ways, and also different ways of teaching the same content. Teachers, therefore, can plan their lessons with their students' needs and abilities very much in mind.
- They were also pleased with the professional development opportunities for teachers. As they plan and teach, they are guided towards self-evaluation, reflection and using feedback – all with a view to improving the quality of their work.
- Language learning has become less desk bound and more active, less silent and more vocal, less teacher-directed and more child-centred.
- It is a very enriching programme that helps a teacher to analyse the learning processes at work.
- Some teachers of Class 8 have reservations. They are trying out the new methods and approaches but they find that the external examination poses a problem. This is possibly because the teachers are very much involved with teaching for examinations rather than

moving on to a child-centred approach to teaching and learning. They maintain that the BEMTUP approach is very good provided the education system makes the shift away from the very examination oriented approach we now have to a more independent learning approach.

## **Conclusion**

The programme has gained momentum and has found a place in many primary schools in Fiji since it began in 1996. More than 400 teachers will have graduated by the end of the five-year lifespan of the project, which finishes early next year. Class 7 and 8 teachers who have not yet been lucky will get their chance when the Ministry of Education takes over. Cycle 5 is due to start at the end of this year and more cycles are planned until all the teachers have received the training.

## **References**

BEMTUP Handout for District Education Officers' Workshop, 1996.

Hindson, Colin, BEMTUP Team Leader (2000) personal communication.