

Extending the Reach of Schools

Joseph Veramu

(This paper is based on an address to the Fiji Principals' Association in May 2002)

Introduction

Schools generally do not cater for dropouts. Once students fail their external exams or drop out due to truancy, financial constraints, or for other reasons, the school moves on in developing those students still remaining within its ambit. Principals throughout Fiji provide leadership and innovation in their schools. They have great influence in bringing about positive changes that can (a) reduce the number of drop-outs by making school life more fulfilling for them, and (b) help those who leave early to fit into the socio-economic life of urban and rural communities. This article looks at ways in which these positive changes can be brought about and implemented for the betterment of all students, but perhaps more particularly, those who are potential school dropouts.

Current situation

In 2002 we have 154 high schools educating an estimated 68,500 students. While there have been major improvements in our education system since independence, one factor that has not changed is the external exam system, which begins in primary school and continues up to Form 7. At every stage of their school life, students of low academic capability are weeded out by these exams. As long as the system exists, so will the dropouts.

Some statistics

In 1988, 20,855 Fiji students enrolled in Class 1. By 2000, only 3,851 students from

this group had reached Form 7 (Government of Fiji 2000:30). These figures should be considered in the context of Fiji's youthful population with 62.7% below the age of 29. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 make up 19.97% of Fiji's population, a total of 150,637 people. It is noted that about 16,500 young people leave school every year, of whom some 14,500 actively seek work. Only about 8,000 are able to find work. This leaves about 6,500 who must be absorbed into the informal economic sector (MYEOS 2000).

Problems Faced by Students

I now turn to problems and constraints faced by high school students. Recent research has pinpointed these problems. Many students drink *yaqona* and alcohol, smoke cigarettes and marijuana and engage in premarital sex. If school-based programmes and counselling strategies deal directly with drug and alcohol prevention, reproductive health and values education, then students will get some informed guidance to help them deal with their problems.

A national survey of 1,629 Fiji students between the ages of 13 and 15 by UNICEF-Pacific in 1999 revealed the following data:

§ *Alcohol use:* 40% of the young people surveyed had tasted alcohol. The proportion of current drinkers was 26% for boys and 9% for girls. 69% of the boys and 54% of the girls had been involved in binge drinking, that is five or more drinks in a single sitting.

- § *Kava use*: three in five males and two in five females have tried drinking *kava*. 24% of those surveyed were drinking *kava* on a regular basis.
- § *Tobacco use*: one in five young people smoked their first whole cigarette before their 10th birthday. At least 54% of current smokers indicated that one or both of their parents smoked.
- § *Marijuana use*: 13% of young people interviewed have tried smoking marijuana. More males (12%) than females (2%) smoked marijuana (UNICEF 1999).

What can be done to help?

Counseling

Effective counseling at school can play an important role. Students need continuous counseling and there should be a proactive programme of teachers appointed as counsellors, or visits from trained counsellors, to advise students, particularly those who may be having difficulties in their homes. Counselling will help students to cope with their studies, and the stresses that sometimes lead to truancy, premature dropping out from school and, very occasionally, suicide.

School programmes

The UNICEF survey made the following observation.

78% of young people currently smoking have the desire to stop smoking. (UNICEF 1999: ii) A pragmatic solution would be to offer innovative training programmes that help students make responsible choices for the positive promotion of their health. A number of organisations currently provide innovative training in drug education, and sexual and reproductive health issues. Such organisations are the Fiji Council of Social

Services, the Fiji Red Cross, the Fiji Community Education Association, the Drug Education Unit of the Fiji Police and the Ministry of Youth.

It is unfortunate that some organisations like the Reproductive and Family Health Association have problems with principals who are unwilling to let them provide peer education and counselling to students. Since there is usually a very high correlation between drugs and sex, principals are encouraged to allow highly trained peer educators to advise students in their schools.

Parental Education

UNICEF (1999: ii) suggests that, when it comes to children and parents smoking, schools that have a community education programme or PTA should consider providing parental education on enlightened child rearing methods. If schools organise programmes with the parents, it will show parents what the school is trying to achieve and why, and how they can support their children and the school's efforts.

Education Reforms

The Fiji Islands Education Commission/ Panel Report (Government of Fiji 2000:160-161) has come up with recommendations that will help provide educational reforms for the upliftment of young people's education and development. If implemented, these recommendations could reduce the number of early school leavers, and will give those who do leave early a better chance of making a living.

- § Principals are encouraged to support programmes run by the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, St John Ambulance, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and Outward

Bound Programme. These extracurricular activities help students develop values that complement schoolwork and, when students fail academically, the training they have received helps them to survive in the world outside school.

§ The Commission also recommended that experienced people in local communities be encouraged to teach young people traditional arts, crafts and music, and also be coaches for various sports.

§ It also recommended that links be established with the private sector so local companies and businesses can provide sponsorship and prizes for innovative students programmes.

These school-based extracurricular activities provide students with survival skills and values that will help them in the harsh world where economic difficulties are a fact of life.

Non-Formal Training

The Education Commission/Panel Report also recommended that the Ministry of Youth, Employment Opportunities and Sports (MYEOS) be given an increased budgetary allocation to ensure effective delivery of non-formal training for school-leavers. I have spoken to the Minister for Youth and youth officials and am assured that there are concrete plans to provide programmes for youths. The Ministry of Youth also has programmes in schools, not just for school-leavers.

Per Capita and Tuition Fee Grants

For every student who is in school, government provides a fixed per capita grant and tuition fee grant. It is normal practice of the Ministry of Education to return unused funds from students who do

not complete their studies to the Ministry of Finance. I think that this practice could be reviewed and provision made for these funds to be channeled back to schools to be used specifically for non-formal parental education programmes or for support of additional resources for academically weak students.

Savings scheme

A savings scheme, beginning when students enter Form 3, will be of great benefit to all students — those who continue up to Form 7, as well as those who, despite the best efforts of teachers, drop out of school earlier. A savings scheme can act as a safety net for dropouts when they leave school. Yat Sen Secondary School has set up a successful scheme with advice from the United Nations Development Programme. Students save in multiples of 50 cents, are allowed 2 withdrawals per year and can withdraw all their money when they leave school. The savings scheme encourages a culture of thrift, particularly for potential school dropouts. If you wish to introduce the scheme in your school, log on to undp.org.fj or ring UNDP on 3300399.

Vocational training

A number of schools provide multicraft vocational education (TVET) for students who have been identified as academically weak and channelled into TVET, as well as those who have already dropped out of school and then been recalled and offered the training.

It is important that the training offered is in line with what the job market or industry requires in your area. A good way of getting information on this is to conduct a small-scale survey of former students of your vocational centre. If you find that at least 35% of students have found jobs in

the vocational areas for which they were trained, then the multicraft programme is sustainable. If you find that fewer than 35% have found jobs, then it is best to close down the vocational programme and use the available space as study space for students in the academic programme. Let the drop-outs in your area be catered for by government agencies, churches or NGOs who have courses that will be more sustainable.

Conclusion

Schools have important roles to play in greatly reducing the number of students who drop out prematurely from schools. I have noted counseling, encouraging saving schemes, vocational training based specifically on the needs of the job market, drug prevention education, parental education, and the re-channeling of unused per capita tuition fee grants as some of the ways of helping students. What is needed is innovative thinking and proactive action on the part of principals and their staff in tackling problems faced by potential school dropouts.

References

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