Introduction

The primary school, as the first formal educational institution in the majority of the Pacific Island countries (PICs), plays the crucial role of laying a sound foundation in basic education for the nation's children. Acknowledged as an integral part of the national human resource development efforts, primary education is increasingly attracting attention from different quarters, including donor agencies, national governments and educational administrators. At a recent workshop of educators from the PICs (BELS, 1996), for example, it was noted that basic education is a vital building block for development and that there is widespread recognition now of basic education as empowering people to enhance the course of their own growth. It was further argued that countries with quality basic education do better economically and that basic education is known to help reduce poverty, infant mortality and population growth.

The South Pacific region [taken here as the area covered by the twelve USP member countries] is diverse and complex in many ways. Yet it shares a number of common denominators in education, due mainly to the fact that formal education with all its structures and ingredients - schools, curriculum, examinations, timetables - is a European introduction. Also, the region has shared English as a common language and the countries have worked together on educational matters through regional institutions and projects, more and more so in recent times. Interaction among the senior educators in the region has been steadily increasing as is evident from the number of meetings and consultations held annually. With reference to South Pacific Literature, Subramani (1996) points out that

Despite such diverse political history, it is not difficult to find similar elements of consciously or
unconsciously held values in thought, feelings and imagination, reinforced by the island environment and cultural contact, that constitute the unifying bonds. Almost all indigenous languages in this region derive from the Malayo-Polynesian family of languages and all the peoples of the region lived by subsistence farming in small communities organised on kin-based principles. Three common denominators are: a rich oral culture, the colonial experience and the English language.

The story of formal schooling is similar. While the process of adaptation and development is evident, the schools continue to uphold assumptions and practices learnt during the past. In Fiji, Singh (1992) and Jenkins and Singh (1996) found that in organisational and pedagogical matters, the primary school is perceived as consisting of the infant classes (classes one and two), the middle primary (classes three to six) and the upper primary (classes seven and eight), each generally reflecting the progressive child-centred, the elementary education and the classic examination ideologies, respectively. Furthermore, the primary schools in the region have also had common experiences through their sharing in regional curricula and materials (such as the South Pacific Commission Oral English course and the allied reading materials, for example) and through professional training programmes for educators in the neighbouring metropolitan countries - New Zealand and Australia, in particular.

In an earlier overview of primary education in the PICs, Singh and Benson (1993) noted that national commitment to providing primary education on the widest possible scale is now the norm across the region. It was further observed that while the quantitative expansion of schools has led to enhanced access to primary schooling, there was room for considerable improvement in the quality of schooling (Thaman, 1989; Muralidhar, 1989, Elley and Mangubhai, 1989; Pacific Curriculum Conference, 1991).

This paper focuses on the conditions for teaching and learning that
are widely shared by the primary schools in the PICs and discusses their impact on the quality of education being provided and on the professional role of primary school teachers.

It is being realised that there is a wide variation in the terms and conditions of service of primary teachers in the region, although they are linked in union matters through the Council of Pacific Education (COPE) based in Suva. Suffice to say here that teacher motivation and morale are closely related to the perceived social status of teachers in the community, and the monetary and other benefits accorded to them in relation to other professional groups in the country. I have, however, opted in this discussion to focus on classroom conditions that pertain to pedagogical matters: social and cultural environment, physical conditions, and teaching and learning resources in particular.

The Context

The PICs have over the years held regular consultation under the auspices of the UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, Apia (1982-1996). The senior educators' intimate knowledge of the educational issues in their respective countries and their experiences as senior educational administrators place them in a special position to articulate the educational needs, and to identify those needs that are shared by other countries and those that are unique to their own nations. The consultations have paved the way for such regional initiatives as the current Basic Education and Life Skills Programme (BELS, 1993-1997). In its preamble, the BELS Programme Document provides a glimpse of the problems that face the PICs in education in the primary sector:

- The grossly inadequate number of well-trained teachers, particularly in outer islands.

- The high costs of traditional in-service training.

The difficulty of providing sustained follow up activities
The low status of teachers and their low morale.

- The lack of planning, management and evaluation skills in Senior Ministry Officers.

- The low reading standards in primary schools.

- The inadequate distribution of reading materials for schools.

- The lack of balance and relevance in curricula.

- The inadequate school-community linkages.

- The lack of capacity within Ministries to collect data and manage information systems.

The BELS Programme was thus developed as a regional donor-assisted programme to contribute towards the overall quality of primary education in the following eleven PICs: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Western Samoa. It began in 1993 under UNESCO execution and then moved to IOE, USP from mid-1995. It has achieved considerable success in providing in-service education to teachers (classroom skills, literacy education and community support for education); helping countries to strengthen their planning, management and evaluation skills; and on a smaller scale, helping countries to develop agricultural education curricula for the upper primary/lower secondary levels.

An extension of the programme for three years with a sharper focus on literacy education and resources is presently under consideration. The new focus continues to address the issue of improving literacy standards in the region generally. The BELS programme has, perhaps for the first time, alerted us dramatically to the fact that school attendance and becoming literate and numerate are not necessarily
the same things. Data from the Programme-initiated Pacific Islands Literacy Levels (PILL) tests show that while a fair percentage of primary school children are achieving well, there also exists the problem of many children moving through the school system without gaining the expected knowledge and basic skills in literacy and numeracy. (These children are seen as being at risk of losing out on their learning as they move up the primary school). The PILL tests have also generated considerable interest in, and concern for standards in basic literacy in the primary schools, among the educators in the PICs and have clearly had an impact on the nature of the proposed phase three of the programme.

Working within the framework of BELS, the BELS team of professional staff and national resource persons continue to ask questions about the factors that seem to be contributing to a sound pedagogical environment and practice in the PICs. Obviously, a deep understanding of what our schools and classrooms are really like - of those aspects that enrich the classrooms and of those that present special pedagogical challenge to teachers as professionals, would seem to be an essential prerequisite for successful implementation of any planned intervention which aims to improve the quality of education.

As a follow-up to the results of the PILL tests, the ESPAM Module of the Programme has been promoting school-level analysis by suggesting that, among others, the following questions should be considered as starting points:

a) **School/Teacher factors:**

i) Is it the different size of the classes?

ii) Is it the professional quality of the teacher (including such things as regular lesson preparation, interest in both language and number etc.)?

iii) Is it the amount and quality of resources available to the
iv) Does the rural or urban location of the school have any effect on performance?

v) How much community and parental support does the school receive?

vi) Is it the way in which the whole school is administered (efficiency, punctuality, regular staff meetings etc.)?

vii) Is it the socio-economic status of the school?

viii) Is the school properly monitored by those responsible for this work?

ix) Is the school properly focused in terms of time allocations for various activities?

b) Student factors:

i) Does the school have admission procedures which tend to admit all applicants, or is there a screening process at work?

ii) From which socio-economic background (ie high/medium/low) do most students come?

iii) What proportion of the students attend some form of preschool, as an introduction to formal schooling?

iv) Are there special conditions relating to the home or health of the children which might affect their school achievement?

(ESPAM Module, 1996)

The list is not meant to be exhaustive. It is, however, hoped that the questioning process will increase the teachers’ understanding of the
real factors operating in their own situation and facilitate appropriate follow up action.

Social and Cultural Environment

Admiration for our schools from abroad generally comes on two counts. Firstly, that Pacific children are easier to teach (meaning in particular that in comparison to classrooms in the neighbouring metropolitan countries there are fewer classroom management/discipline problems here) and secondly, that at the lower primary level in particular there is a remarkable display of spontaneity and happiness by children inside and outside the classrooms.

At a very general level, classrooms everywhere present their own social and cultural environments. The bringing together of thirty or so children under the care of an adult in an organised manner for the purpose of teaching and learning forms a fairly dynamic social community of its own (Pollard, 1985). The primary classrooms in the Pacific are no exception.

It is also true that classroom events are context-bound and that simple teaching acts simultaneously bring into play social, cultural, cognitive and political dimensions. While these remain school-based, they are nonetheless related to and influenced by the macro-environment the school shares with the community. Jenkins and Singh, 1996; Singh, 1992; and Thaman, 1988, for example, show how schools consciously attempt to reflect the values and expectations of cultural groups they serve. Teachers therefore face the challenge of relating children’s home-culture to the formal and the hidden curriculum of the school, and while doing so, of creating a school ethos that is conducive to the achievement of the objectives of the school. It is with this aspect that our primary teachers are very much in need of guidance.

The Medium of Instruction

While there is considerable use of local languages during teaching,
officially there is a pattern of moving towards a greater use of English (or French in Vanuatu) as children progress through the primary schools in the region. Fiji is a good example of this transitional bilingualism. However, in actual practice, it is widely observed that teachers switch freely from one language to the other in all classes at the primary level, whether officially mandated or not. (Jenkins and Singh, 1996; Tamata, 1996). And even in a country such as Solomon Islands which has no official vernacular and therefore it can be argued that school children in Solomon Islands do all of their schooling in English, (Mugler 1997:6), the use of Pijin by teachers is also widespread. Lees (1996) notes:

At the primary level Pijin (or in some localities a vernacular) is widely used as the unofficial medium of instruction. Available materials are only in English, but teachers use Pijin orally because the students learn more quickly when this is the medium. This is no trivial achievement (Lees, 1996; 191).

From the complex language situation in the region, one can tease out the following two as key pedagogical concerns. There is first the concern for meaningful and effective language acquisition by the pupils. In the Koro study (Jenkins and Singh, 1996) teachers were observed to be struggling to co-teach or switch to teaching in English with limited resources and sometimes with inadequate language competence or professional training on their part. Secondly, there lies the difficult choice of using another language while ensuring that the local culture is not being adversely affected, as children are to some extent being exposed, perhaps unwittingly, to another worldview, especially when there is a marked absence of space and emphasis for the local cultural aspects.

There are exciting interventions taking place currently in the whole area of language curriculum and teaching at the primary level in the region. At the regional level, the introduction of the whole-language approach (BELS, 1993) is asking teachers to expand their repertoire of
language teaching methods and to promote greater learner involvement in language activities. A more localised example of innovation in language curriculum is the new bilingual programme in Tonga which aims to teach Tongan and English together during the primary school years. The teaching approach is described as follows:

During language activities, the teacher and the children should move freely back and forth from one language to the other. This is what is meant by bilingual teaching (Class 1 Resource Book, Introduction: 1994)

Interestingly, teachers in the Koro schools felt uncomfortable with the idea of mixing English and Fijian in one lesson. They felt that by mixing the languages in this manner, it is possible that some children might fall between both languages, ending up functionally illiterate in both (Jenkins and Singh, 1996:36). It also seems true that the curriculum demands in the primary schools in the region increase substantially due to the fact that among other school subjects, time has to be found to accommodate the teaching of and in two languages. The result adds to intensification of teachers’ work and could be a factor that hinders the use of strategies that require longer periods of pupil involvement in completing the learning tasks.

Physical Conditions, Teaching and Learning Resources

These areas are so basic that they seem to be taken for granted in the developed countries and perhaps for that reason they are not seen worthy of comment in educational literature. In the Pacific, the need for improvement in these areas is vital and urgent. Beeby (1969), highlighting the need to supply primary teachers (in the Indonesian context) with basic materials such as cardboard, glue, paints, scissors, hammers, nails and wood for making elementary science equipment for weighing, measuring, experimenting, etc, forcefully captures the link between resources and the quality of teaching:

These things are too humble to find their way into the awesome literature of modern educational planning,
but, for the teacher in the classroom, they can make the difference between archaic instruction and a new vision of his job. Clarion calls for the relevance of education, or for teaching students to think, have precious little chance of being heard in barren classrooms where young children have nothing to think about but symbols in chalk and ink (p52).

It is acknowledged that good buildings, equipment and resources in themselves will not make any real difference in the quality of classroom learning unless these are utilised properly by teachers. On the other hand, and notwithstanding the potential resourcefulness of teachers to improvise and create imaginative learning situations, the fact remains that under pressure, classroom teachers will continue to use methods of teaching which serve their immediate concerns of covering the work in hand and keeping the class moving, even if that means keeping to the routine direct instruction all the time.

The issue of the quality of physical facilities and resources is also relative. For example, to a teacher in a rural church-run primary school some 30 miles from Honiara on the west coast of Guadalcanal, her present school compared favourably against others in the country, although the classrooms were fairly bare and had half-walls (to facilitate ventilation, a feature fairly typical of classrooms in the Solomons):

Teaching in this school is easier than other schools. The classrooms are almost permanent. Teachers’ houses are built well. Rich in water. Can make gardens here at the school.

(Grade 1 Teacher, Vaturanga Primary School, Fieldnotes, Singh, 1997)

On the other hand, 15 student teachers from Australia doing their teaching practice in Fiji (Booth and Singh, 1997), offered the following comments when asked to describe their perceptions of
conditions for teaching and learning in the classrooms they were attached to:

The room was wall to wall desks with over 50 students. It was enclosed and there was no room to perform any activities other than general chalk and talk - teacher-centred strategies.

Rooms are bare and lack visual stimulation. The environment is unstimulating and does not capture the students’ imagination, therefore leads to boredom.

Teachers are so focused on exams. There’s so much pressure for both the teacher and the pupils to perform well in the exams.

Poor or inadequate resources is the most discouraging aspect of the classroom environment.

On the positive side, the students noted the use of positive reinforcement by the teachers, concern for the pupils’ future and the eagerness to learn displayed by pupils.

They are so patient and work quietly.

The above comments need of course to be taken as glimpses only by student teachers from outside Fiji with limited time and exposure to fully appreciate the local situation.

Our experience generally indicates that as one moves out into rural areas in the PICs, primary schools begin to show serious limitations in terms of physical conditions and the quality and range of basic teaching and learning resources for both teachers and pupils.

We also need to note that there is evidence of considerable activity in the PICs in the areas of curriculum change -- almost all countries have their own CDUs now. Whether curriculum changes continue to
advocate direct instruction as the norm or now introduce freer approaches such as those whole-language ones promoted by the BELS Programme, there can be little doubt about the need to upgrade those classrooms (even if these are in a minority) that do not look like classrooms due to poor structure, paucity of teaching and learning materials and the resultant absence of any evidence of children’s work and creativity.

With the introduction of Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS), also in BELS, it is hoped that the administrators will have access to accurate hard data on the conditions of classrooms in the system, including information on the fundamentals such as desks, chairs, cupboards, blackboards, textbooks, materials for children’s activities in areas such as expressive arts, physical education etc.

Implications for the Professional Role of Teachers

There are a number of givens that teachers everywhere operate within - centralised curriculum development, external examinations, policies on language of instruction, and the overall infra-structure and physical facilities. Much as one would like to see improvements and changes in these areas, these are slow in coming, due mainly, in most cases (but not all), to limited financial resources.

Efforts are continuing globally, however, (for example, International Conference on Education, Geneva, 1996) to focus on strengthening the professional role of teachers and at the same time using the enhanced role as a strategy for improving the status and working conditions of teachers (Educational Innovation, 1996:5). The movement towards a redefinition of teachers’ professional role includes suggestions such as

a) increasing teachers’ input and control over aspects of their work which are highly pedagogical (in the broadest meaning of the term) in nature: curriculum, teaching methods, resources, assessment, counselling and guidance etc.
b) promoting team-work in order to improve upon the traditionally isolated nature of teachers' work, where separated most of the time from other colleagues, teachers experience limited interaction, collective reflection and planning, and

c) promoting independent learning both in children through a variety of teaching approaches and resources, and in teachers through a mix of formal in-service education and school-based, teacher-led initiatives.

Primary teachers and teacher educators in the PICs have been participating, especially through regional programmes such as the Pacific Educational Management (Project, 1990) and BELS (1993-97), in activities which have reflected some of the ideas in the above suggestions.

School-based in-service training, either conducted or facilitated by the head teacher, is arguably a strong feature of the BELS Programme. The Programme also encourages national resource persons and through them the classroom teachers to reflect upon their practice and requirements.

Asking teachers to act as agents of change is not a new idea. What seems to be new is the focus on changing the agents themselves first, in this case, by redefining and expanding their professional role to include, in addition to implementing a given curriculum, school-based team work for situational analysis and action as far as practicable. Case studies, action research on selected themes, collaboration with resource people from outside for tackling pressing themes or needs, are a few tried strategies in the region which seem to be proving effective in promoting a redefinition of the professional role of primary teachers.

Concluding Remarks

It is hoped that as the awareness of and critical reflection on teachers' professional role increases, collaboration will increase
between teachers themselves first and then with other partners in education. This should increase our collective understanding of social-cultural issues involved in formal schooling in the region, as well as create a teaching culture that would increase teacher input in meeting the basic teaching-learning needs in our schools.

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