Implications of policy directives on the teachers

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to explore the implication of policy directives on the teachers. This qualitative study which employed a phenomenological approach utilized semi-structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews to gather data. Fifty six teachers were purposefully selected to collect data. The data analysis was done through a low tech method. The analysis of data revealed that training and support should be an integral part of the new policy implementation process. The findings also revealed that the policy directives often bring unanticipated challenges and have negative consequences on the personal and professional well being of the teachers, impedes their commitment and enthusiasm, instigates loss of their family time, and creates teacher centered classrooms. The study also emphasizes that policy directives must be evidence based and teachers must be given an opportunity to be part of the decision making process.

Key words
policy directives evidence based
unintended consequences quality learning and teaching
teachers training and support

Introduction
The delivery of quality teaching and learning program to improve student performance has been a major challenge for many developing countries. To achieve this, policy directives are prepared at the discretion of people who hold power. Chand (2015) stated that in a country like Fiji, policy making at national level is frequently influenced by political beliefs and expediency. He further postulates that recently curriculum has become more of a political tool. As such, in 2015, the Ministry of Education, introduced a new policy directive aimed at improving student performance in schools. The directive was to complete the three term prescribed syllabi in two terms, setting term three for remedial work only (C6/15). It was also for the first time in Fiji’s history that the greatest number of external examinations prepared by Ministry of Education had to be conducted in all classrooms from years 6 to years 13.

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To make policy directives a reality, meticulous planning and preparation is required by the teachers and the heads of institutions. Teachers must be absolutely focused on the delivery of quality learning programs interspersed with structured remedial and revision programs while preparing students for external examinations. Cheng (2009) posited that in order to meet the challenges of survival into new century numerous educational reforms are initiated in many countries in the Asia Pacific region and other parts of the world. The Fijian education system has been undergoing massive educational changes in order to improve student learning and their performance in classrooms. Cheng further conjectured that with bottle-neck effect of educational reforms negative impact on teachers and the whole teaching profession are experienced. The documented negative impact include mood disorders, increased work pressure, low morale and consistently high workload with increased and long hours of work, and professional well being of teachers. Changes in expectations of the teacher’s role have been particularly visible in the wake of policy directive by the Ministry of Education.

Teaching and learning are what ultimately makes difference in the lives of the learners. Despite workload pressures and unwanted external requirements most teachers retain a strong sense of commitment to teaching and learning. Many teachers work assiduously to improve the effectiveness of their practices. The role of education policy is to provide guidance, resource and accountability to support high quality teaching and learning.

When the decisions are made using top down approach, the teachers have no other option then to follow the expected directives. Valli and Buese (2007) posit that teachers have been adaptive in response to the changing educational trends and policy demands. They further state that high stakes policy directives promote an environment where teachers relate to their students differently, enact pedagogies that are often at odds with the vision of best practice and at the same time experience high level of stress. Too many policy demands coming too fast, often results in teacher discouragement, role ambiguity and superficial responses and administrative goals (Ibid)

Ahmad (1998) while addressing educational development in Malaysia stated that most of these reforms are characterised by the government’s efforts to adopt education to national development goals. Curriculum changes need to occur in order to make new opportunities and explore new ways of working (Fox and Henri 2005). The introduction of sweeping policy directives and especially favouring examinations creates a tidal wave of pressures for rote learning and movement away from student centred classrooms.

Fullan (2007) states that to effect change in the way people do things especially the way teachers teach, is time consuming. Studies suggest that while teachers work changes all the time in the face of strong mandates, they are relatively powerless to resist changes.

While the policy directive given is to be followed, relatively little research has been done to gather the experiences of the primary school teachers especially in a developing country like Fiji. Hence this research was carried out to study the implication of policy directives on the teachers and the curriculum they teach.

**Methodology**

This qualitative research which was phenomenological in nature used in-depth interviews and semi structured questionnaire to gather data. A total of fifty six participants were purposefully selected (four for interviews and fifty two for questionnaire). These participants were full time teachers who were enrolled in a degree program at a university. Majority were females (n = 34) and the rest were males (n = 22). The data analysis was done using a low tech method.
Interviews

The researchers used in-depth, non-directive, semi-structured interview which was conducted in the interviewer’s office. Both the interviewer and the respondents agreed to this arrangement. Each interview was audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. Before the interview, the respondents were informed about the research and the interview only began after their consent.

The following teachers were interviewed with their profile illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>BEd (Primary)</td>
<td>18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>T. Cert (Primary)</td>
<td>24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>HEd. Dip (Primary)</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>T. Cert (Primary)</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questionnaires

In addition to in-depth interview with the teachers, semi-structured questionnaires were utilized to collect data. Questionnaire was administered upon fifty two teachers who were part of an education unit for their Bachelor of Education (Primary) program. The response rate was 100%. Their informed consent was sought before the study eventuated.

Data reduction and analysis

The data gathered from interviews and questionnaires proved a tremendous volume. These had to be processed, reduced to a manageable level and analysed. All the analysis was done using a low tech method.

Discussion of findings

The careful analysis of gathered data revealed three major themes. These included; Teacher experiences on policy directive, teacher set-back due to non-availability of text books and resource materials, and teachers need for support.

Teachers experiences of policy directive

Policy document such as C6/15 which required teachers to complete the three term prescribed syllabi in two terms, setting term three for remedial work only in preparation of exams called for greater teacher participation and consultation. The teachers felt that whenever policy directives are implemented, teachers must be fully informed and up-skilled to bring about the desired changes. Most teachers (n=48) explicitly stated that it is important that teachers must be consulted before implementing curricular changes. One teacher (TA) stated that while she possessed all the good qualities of a teacher and was always committed, the least she expected was training and support and not the policy imposed on her.

The non-involvement of the teachers and not empowering them in the policy decision making impedes the enthusiasm and the commitment of the teachers. The policy directives often bring unanticipated challenges and have negative consequences on the personal and professional well being of the teachers.

Teacher B stated that he now has less time to spend with his family while he has to have extra classes both in the morning and the afternoon. He also stated that he has shortened lunch breaks and have to take Saturday classes.

Teacher D stated that because she had to take extra classes in term two she had to sacrifice her studies for a trimester. She also stated that she had been stressed out as the priority was to produce results.

Content overload has been blamed for shifting the approach from student centered classroom to teacher centered classrooms. Most teachers (n = 42) agreed that in order to cover the syllabi within the stipulated time frame, they had to revert to teacher centered classrooms whereby they very well understood the importance of student centred classrooms for effective learning to take place. They also stated that if the content was reduced, this would make teaching more exciting. They stated that the
curricular should be completed in a timeframe for which it is intended to be completed; otherwise the curricula content should be reduced.

**Teacher set-back due to non-availability of text books and resource materials.**

Despite the fact that the policy directive was to be adhered to as much as possible, teachers encountered various problems with the non-availability of text books. Most teachers (n=42) claimed that the text books arrived late during the term and some even had to print their own copies to teach the students.

Teacher A stated ‘When the text books finally arrived in week 5, I had to really rush with the delivery of the contents. At times I gave lot of notes to the students in order to cover the syllabi on time’. One of the teachers, who taught year 5, stated that one of the text books in Science had not reached their school at all and she had made her own copy from the soft copy that was available on the Ministry website.

**Teachers need for support**

A study conducted by Elkonin and Foxcroft (1998) revealed that lack of resources and lack of materials worsen the probabilities of sound implementation in classrooms. The intended outcome cannot be achieved by a policy unless it is supported by appropriate teaching and learning resources.

One of the teachers (Teacher C) stated that “while I tirelessly try to improve the student performance in the classroom, my work is continuously disadvantaged by the lack of resources in the classroom. This often leads to a lot of frustration”.

While most teachers stated that the policy directives has led to workload pressure and unwanted external requirements they still retain a strong sense of commitment to teaching and learning. This was evident when a teacher commented that whatever policy directives are implemented they are basically powerless to resist. However she said that she would remain committed in her career.

**Conclusion**

Policy directives present a far reaching implication on our education system and this is very evident on the teachers. Policy directives must be carefully thought out and supported by evidence. If not carefully planned, these may bring unintended consequences on teachers. These include impediment of commitment and enthusiasm, negative consequences on their personal and professional well being, loss of family time, neglect of their professional growth and reverting to teacher centered classrooms.

Training and support must be a key priority with the implementation of the new initiatives. Accordingly, teachers must teach curriculum in the required timeframe for which the curriculum is intended to be completed or the content should be reduced to cater for shorter timeframe. While the policy directives must be evidence based, the teachers must be given an opportunity to be part of the decision making process.

**REFERENCES**


