



Strengthening Fiji's education system: a view from key stakeholders

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Having achieved universal primary education, the Government of Fiji has stated that it will now focus attention on raising school learning achievements in equitable ways, and it has identified a number of policy priorities. This article reports on a qualitative study with children and young people in Fiji on their views and experiences of education. Two issues identified by children and young people are the focus of this article: ending corporal punishment and greater professionalism among teachers. These issues are examined against the backdrop of the government's stated policy objectives. It is concluded that policy objectives are more likely to be achieved if school children are identified as stakeholders and partners.

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The achievement of universal primary education has long been a key objective of development and social policy—internationally and within nation-states. In Fiji, education and academic achievement are valued and the nation has among the highest primary school enrolment and completion rates in the Pacific. Significantly, boys and girls are enrolled in primary school in equal numbers; however, girls outnumber boys in secondary school. These numbers suggest that education is largely a success story. This article suggests, however, that while enrolment figures are the most common measure of a nation's educational achievement, they reveal only part of the story. Sound and

responsive educational policies, practice and priorities need to be based not only on statistical data on enrolment, completion and retention rates but on an understanding of issues such as students' experience of school and the quality of teaching, curricula and educational management.

This article aims to contribute to deeper insights into key issues and challenges facing Fiji's education system by focusing on the views and experiences of one group of stakeholders who are often invisible within debates about education: schoolchildren. In doing so, it draws on the findings of a qualitative study with 29 children and young people from across Fiji.



The first section of the article provides an overview of Fiji's primary and secondary education system, before turning to a discussion of current policy priorities. The article then examines why children's participation in debates about education is of value, arguing that children are key, but often neglected, stakeholders in the development and delivery of educational policies and processes. I then turn to an exploration of two issues arising from this study that have important implications for education policy and practice: corporal punishment and greater professionalism among teachers.

Fiji's education system: background

Fiji has achieved considerable success in expanding access to primary and, to a lesser extent, secondary schools. The 1996 census indicated that 98 per cent of all 6 year olds and almost 96 per cent of all 12 year olds were in school. According to Ministry of Education figures, Fiji's gross enrolment rate at primary level was 109 per cent in 2005—indicating that Fiji had achieved universal primary education. Data from the 1996 census suggest a steady decline in enrolment across the years of secondary school, with 92.7 per cent of 13 year olds and 87.1 per cent of 14 year olds enrolled in school. Overall, 72 per cent of children in the relevant age cohort were enrolled in secondary school in 1996. Ministry of Education figures suggest that gross enrolment at secondary level stood at 80 per cent in 2005. Notably, boys and girls were enrolled in almost equal numbers at primary school, with boys more likely to repeat a grade or drop out. In secondary school, a gender gap emerges, with boys less likely to be enrolled than girls. Among the 15 to 17-year age cohort, girls outnumber boys

by about 6 percentage points (Ministry of Finance and National Planning 2004:36). The numbers reverse in post-secondary education, with more males than females continuing to university or technical and vocational education.

Fiji's education system is unusual in the role played by local communities and community-based organisations. The Ministry of Education operated only two of the 714 primary schools and 12 of the 160 secondary schools operating in Fiji in 2004 (Ministry of Education 2004). Private and government-owned schools combined account for less than 1 per cent of Fiji's schools, while approximately 18 per cent of primary schools are operated by religious organisations. Communities, generally via school management committees, operate 74 per cent of primary schools. Fiji's decentralised education system has been described as a 'double-edged sword' (Bessell and Petueli 2008). The extent of local involvement and ownership potentially creates an environment in which schools are embedded in and valued by local communities. There are, however, concerns that the localised nature of the system can result in inequality between schools, marked variation in educational quality and confused and inconsistent policy and practice. This is exemplified by a 1998 study that found that a significant proportion of head teachers were unsure about whether school fees were compulsory. The Ministry of Education's policy states that no child should be excluded from school for failing to pay fees. The study concluded, however, that 'many schools are inflexible about the payment of fees, being unsympathetic when parents cannot pay at the beginning of term, and sometimes humiliating non-paying children openly' (Save the Children Fiji 1998:26). School fees, along with costs of uniforms, school materials and transport, are identified as contributing to children exiting the



school system at secondary level (Ministry of Finance and National Planning 2004). Similarly, as discussed later in this article, the Ministry of Education's ban on corporal punishment has not filtered down to all schools, with many teachers and schools unaware of the ban or ignoring it.

Future policy directions

The achievement of universal primary education has opened an opportunity for Fiji to broaden its educational objectives. The government's 2004 national report on achieving the Millennium Development Goals states that 'the important issue here is no longer raising school enrolments but raising school learning achievements in equitable ways' (Ministry of Finance and Planning 2004:34). Nine objectives are identified as priorities

1. improving access to quality education in rural areas
2. improving the educational performance of indigenous Fijian students, which is generally below that of other groups
3. narrowing attainment differences between boys and girls
4. providing access for children with special needs
5. ensuring school is a safe place for all children, with a minimum risk of violence
6. developing and supporting a professional teaching force
7. strengthening quality partnerships between government and all other stakeholders
8. promoting nation building through social justice
9. strengthening and expanding technical and vocational education (Ministry of Finance and Planning 2004:34–5).

Running through these policy objectives are themes of expanding inclusiveness and improving quality. As discussed below, the findings of the study that is the focus of this article have important implications for the ways in which these objectives are interpreted and translated into practice.

In pursuing the objectives outlined above, the Ministry of Education is placing considerable emphasis on the potential value of a nationwide data-collection system, which would focus on repetition rates by grade and survival rates to grade five (Ministry of Finance and National Planning 2004). Such data are important in identifying trends and patterns but do not reveal the ways in which children experience schooling, the quality of education provided or the capacity of teachers—all of which are central to achieving the stated policy objectives. Insights into these issues are dependent on a deep understanding of the views and experiences of key stakeholders within the education system. The Government of Fiji has identified the strengthening of partnerships with stakeholders as necessary to achieving its objectives in relation to education. The concept of partnerships for education has a particularly strong resonance in Fiji, given the decentralised nature of the system. The objectives of the national government cannot be achieved without the support and cooperation of the communities and organisations that manage individual schools.

As the government and the Education Ministry work towards strengthening partnerships, one group is notably absent: schoolchildren. The discourse in Fiji is not dissimilar to the international discourse, in which primary and secondary schoolchildren are cast as beneficiaries of educational services rather than partners or stakeholders. In Fiji, there are very few avenues through which schoolchildren can express their views and priorities in relation



to education—either at the national level or within individual schools. Moreover, there are few studies of Fiji's education system, and the research discussed here is the first to focus explicitly on the views, experiences and priorities of schoolchildren.

Why are children's views important?

The notion that partnerships are important in the provision of education is by no means new and is part of the international discourse on education. The 1990 World Declaration for Education for All called for 'new and revitalised partnerships at all levels', including between 'government and non-government organisations, the private sector, local communities, religious groups and families' (UNESCO 1990:Article 7). In the past two decades, the role and significance of partnerships have been a focus of the scholarly literature and policy discourses about education—internationally and within countries. This is best understood in the context of social policy more broadly, whereby increasing emphasis has been placed on civic engagement on the part of individuals and communities and responsiveness on the part of government. Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall (2004:80) suggest that 'greater participative involvement of citizens and consumers has become a generalised feature of later modernity'. Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall's reference to 'citizens and consumers' indicates a rescripting of roles in recent years, whereby service recipients or users of services have been redefined as consumers (Shaw and Aldridge 2003). This demonstrates the interplay of concepts underpinning social and economic policy, which has been the subject of debate. When cast as consumers, service users are seen as rational actors and the 'best judges of their own interests' (Shaw and Aldridge 2003:36).

In order to make a rational choice about goods and services, consumers need—and demand—objective information on which to base their decisions (Shaw and Aldridge 2003). In some instances, consumers might form effective lobby groups (Gabriel and Lang 1995). While consumers might have a degree of power denied to the 'service recipients' of the past, it has been suggested that 'consumer' and 'citizen' are not necessarily compatible concepts. While equality among those included in the category of citizen is at the heart of citizenship, some commentators have presented consumerism as promoting inequality (Shaw and Aldridge 2003; Baldock 2003). While these debates will continue, it is clear that older concepts of service providers and service recipients are breaking down and creating spaces in which to re-conceptualise the nature of social policy, including education. In this context, it is necessary to explore fully what consumers—in this case, of education—want from the service provided.

Ortiz (2008:199) describes social policy as being about 'bringing people into the centre of policymaking, not by providing residual welfare, but by mainstreaming their needs and voice across sectors'. Within such re-conceptualisations of social policy, partnerships that recognise the views, experience and priorities of consumers of services are an important strategy. In relation to education specifically, partnerships with stakeholders are increasingly considered necessary to shift from an almost exclusive focus on increasing enrolment rates to providing good-quality and relevant education (World Bank 2007).

What is striking, however, is the invisibility of children among those identified as real and potential partners in significant debates and decisions about education systems and services. When secondary and—less often—primary school students have a voice, it is generally through student



councils, whose focus and influence are often circumscribed by teachers, rather than negotiated in partnership between students and teachers or decided by students (Anderson 1998; Alderson 2000). When student councils are able to exercise influence, it rarely extends beyond the individual school into policy debates and decision-making.

The absence of children from the debates about education sits uncomfortably with developments in international policy about the importance of children's participation in decision-making. These developments are due largely to the extension of the international human rights framework to explicitly include children through the development of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UN General Assembly adopted the convention in 1989 and it has since been ratified by all but two countries, making it the most widely ratified of all international human rights treaties. Fiji ratified the convention in 1993 and subsequently established the National Coordinating Committee on Children to oversee its implementation.

The convention has been highly influential in reshaping policy for children at the international level and in many national jurisdictions. While the practical impact of the convention has been limited in Fiji, it has influenced debates about appropriate policies and services for children. The convention is based on four broad categories of rights: survival, development, protection and participation. The concept of children's right to participation is a particularly innovative aspect of the convention. While highly controversial, it has been embraced in the rhetoric (if not always the practice) of many governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including several influential NGOs in Fiji. The participation articles of the UNCRC include Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article

15 (freedom of association and peaceful assembly), Article 17 (right to information) and Article 12. Article 12 is the centrepiece of the participation articles and it states that

1. Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child
2. for this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

In essence, the convention positions children as partners and stakeholders in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Schools and the education system more broadly not only affect but arguably dominate the lives of many children. This is the case in Fiji, where school enrolment rates are high. From this perspective, children's participation as stakeholders is of intrinsic value as a human right.

Beyond the human rights discourse, there is evidence to suggest the potential instrumental value of children's participation in terms of creating positive policy, social and personal outcomes (Lansdowne 2001; Chawla 2002; Tisdall and Davis 2004). Moreover, several studies have demonstrated that children and young people bring different, legitimate and valuable perspectives to significant policy debates (Ridge 2000; Beazley, Bessell, Ennew and Waterson 2006; Bessell forthcoming). In relation to education, students have unique insights and can be argued to be stakeholders and experts with insider knowledge. Disregarding the views, experiences and



priorities of primary and secondary school students significantly reduces the knowledge base on which good policy and practice can be built. Moreover, the protection of children, including within schools, might be dependent largely on the opportunity for them to raise and report situations of real and potential vulnerability and harm.

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations—which conceptualise children’s participation as having intrinsic and instrumental value—the remainder of this article focuses on the findings of a recent study with children and young people of education in Fiji.

Children’s views on priority issues

The study on which this article reports included 29 children and young people (19 girls and 10 boys) aged between 12 and 19 years from across Fiji, including Suva, Nadi, Ba, Lautoka, Levuka, Savusavu and Labasa. The study aimed to capture children and young people’s views and experiences of education in Fiji and to identify the ways in which they thought education could be made a positive experience for all children. The study’s findings have important policy implications given the Fijian government’s stated priorities, as discussed earlier.

This study is one of a rapidly growing number of qualitative studies with children, designed to provide insights into children’s lives, experiences and perspectives and to produce robust, relevant policy findings (Beazley, Bessell, Ennew and Waterson 2006; Punch 2002; Morrow 2001; Christensen and James 2000). The methodology drew on principles of rights-based research, in which respect for the views, preferences and dignity of participants were central (Beazley, Bessell, Ennew and Waterson 2006; Morrow and Alderson 2004). The study

included a Children’s Forum on Education, held in Suva over two days in June 2009, in which all 29 children and young people participated. The forum aimed to

- provide children and young people with a safe space in which they could discuss their experiences of school
- provide children and young people with an opportunity to make recommendations on how to ensure that school was a positive experience for all children in Fiji
- contribute to a foundation for education policies and school practices that were able to progress the human rights and educational needs of all children.

The forum employed a range of methods, including individual accounts of positive experiences, group brainstorming, group discussions, poster making and ranking exercises. Each of these methods were carefully designed to provide robust data while ensuring that the participants were able to express their views freely and enjoy the experience of participating in the research. The study also included semi-structured interviews with 14 children and young people who participated in the forum.

This study does not claim to be representative of all children and young people’s experiences of education in Fiji, or to reflect the priorities of all. It does, however, provide important insights from the perspective of key stakeholders in the educational process. While the experiences of individuals cannot be generalised, the findings raise important issues for consideration by policymakers and for further investigation.

From the forum and the interviews, a number of themes emerged as priorities for the children and young people who participated (Bessell, McKenzie and Anise forthcoming). This article focuses on two that have particular relevance given the



government's policy objectives: ending corporal punishment; and ensuring greater professionalism among teachers.

Ending corporal punishment

One of the Fijian government's stated objectives is to ensure 'school is a safe place for all children, with a minimum... risk of violence'. Central to achieving this objective is ending corporal punishment in practice. Corporal punishment has been a topic of considerable public debate and controversy in Fiji in recent years. In 2002, the High Court of Fiji ruled the use of corporal punishment unconstitutional. The case in question focused on the use of corporal punishment within the criminal justice system; however, in response to a request for clarification from Fiji's Human Rights Commission, Justice Jayant Prakash also ruled the use of corporal punishment in schools unconstitutional and unlawful (High Court of Lautoka, *Naushad Ali vs State*, 21 March 2002). The Ministry of Education announced a ban on the practice after the 2002 High Court decision and developed a Behaviour Management Plan to assist schools to deal with inappropriate student behaviour without resorting to corporal punishment. In February 2009, Interim Minister for Education, Filipe Bole, stated unambiguously that corporal punishment was prohibited in schools and could lead to criminal charges being laid (*Fiji Times*, 17 February 2007).

The *Education Act* is, however, silent on the issue and has not been amended to prohibit corporal punishment explicitly. Article 57 of the *Juveniles Act* provides for 'the right of any parent, teacher or other person having the lawful control or charge of a juvenile to administer reasonable punishment to him'. The national Code of Ethics for Teachers does not address the issue of corporal punishment. As a series of media reports in recent years has revealed, teachers

and the Fiji Teachers Association are deeply divided on the issue, as is the community more broadly ('Teachers address rights', *Fiji Times*, 19 August 2004; 'Fiji teachers upset at corporal punishment ban', Radio New Zealand International, 22 March 2002). There have, however, been several well-publicised cases of corporal punishment being used in quite severe forms—some of which have been prosecuted through the courts (for example, 'Teacher beats 30 students', *Fiji Times*, 18 August 2004).

The continuing widespread use of corporal punishment in schools was, overwhelmingly, the major issue of concern for the participants in this study. The findings of this study indicate clearly that the prohibition on corporal punishment has not changed the practice in many schools. The cases that have received media and legal attention should be seen not as aberrations but as indicative of practices that remain common. Many of the children in this study had experienced or witnessed extremely violent or humiliating forms of corporal punishment. The experiences of the children in this study are in line with a recent study of the physical and emotional punishment of children in Fiji, involving 536 children, which found that school is the most common site for the use of physical punishment against children (Save the Children Fiji 2006).

Significantly, the children and young people in the study recognised the need for discipline in schools. There was, however, unanimous agreement that corporal punishment was inappropriate and ineffective, serving to create an environment characterised by fear and resentment rather than one that was conducive to learning. Several children and young people noted that their teachers were more likely to use physical punishment as a result of anger than as a direct and proportionate response to 'bad' behaviour on the part of students. As one 15-year-old boy explained



Some teachers hit, when children don't do their homework, any reason at all. Anything they use to hit the children, sometimes students are at school with a black eye...In my school some teachers who are older, they can't control their tempers. Sometimes the teachers talk crazy and do crazy things, hitting.

A recurrent theme was of corporal punishment being used as a routine strategy for classroom management and as an outlet for teachers' frustration. The children and young people were strongly of the view that teachers used corporal punishment because they were not sufficiently trained or resourced to deal with everyday classroom situations. This is reflected in the comments of a 15-year-old girl

Sometimes the students are so naughty that the teachers cannot handle them and they just...[shows a hitting action]. But another thing is for unnecessary reasons, when children don't do anything at all, or they start talking or something, that's when they [teachers] start hitting. I think that should be stopped.

One 17-year-old girl made the point succinctly: 'Teachers should learn how to handle students, and how to punish them, but without hitting. That's the most important thing.'

A minority of the children and young people participating in this study indicated that their school did not allow the use of corporal punishment. In two cases, newly appointed principals had prohibited the use of corporal punishment in their schools. In each case, alternative behaviour-management strategies had been introduced, including detention and reporting misbehaviour to parents. In each case, the participants felt that the new strategies were more appropriate and indicated

that behaviour had not deteriorated (or improved) after the prohibition of corporal punishment—as the following exchange indicates

Q. Has behaviour become worse since your principal introduced the no hitting rule?

A. No, it's actually the same as it always has been. Everything is OK. It's just that we have detentions now instead of hitting.

Q. What would you prefer? Hitting or detention?

A. I think detention will do.

While all participants identified hitting (including punching and hitting with objects) as a serious problem, other forms of punishment were also identified as excessively harsh—for example

Sometimes we are thrown out of class and made to sit in the hot sun. Once we forgot our English books and the teacher told us to go and sit outside, so we all sat outside for the whole period. There were around two or three students inside, so the teacher, she just taught them.

Sometimes we get thrown outside for two whole periods, which is like one hour. Just sitting in the sun.

Sometimes we have to just run around, in the sun, for the whole period.

Participants also described the use of unappealing and humiliating tasks—such as being made to clean toilets—as a form of punishment. Three participants talked of students' hair being forcibly cut off as punishment for failing to observe school uniform and grooming codes.

Several participants identified the use of corporal punishment as one reason for truancy among students and a factor in



some children dropping out of school. While further study is necessary to test the veracity of these claims, studies elsewhere have indicated that corporal punishment is a contributing factor to children and young people exiting the formal education system (Bessell 2009). As Fiji's Ministry of Education strives to reduce dropout rates in secondary school—particularly among boys—a deeper understanding of the connection between corporal punishment and dropping out of school might reveal important insights.

Greater professionalism among teachers

Among the government policy objectives is the development and support of a professional teaching force. For the participants in this study, greater professionalism among teachers is a crucial issue. It is important to note that many participants described the immensely positive role that some teachers played in their lives. Several children described with enthusiasm their relationships with individual teachers

My English teacher is the best teacher I've ever come across. She makes English fun and interesting to learn.

One thing I really want to say is that teachers should make teaching enjoyable, 'cos it's worrying when they are just standing up there and talking. I love my chemistry and physics teachers; I love those two subjects and every time I go to school I am actually looking forward to those two subjects because the teachers are actually fun. If I had teachers like that in all my subjects I'd be really enjoying all subjects, not just two.

All participants identified behaviours on the part of a significant proportion of teachers that they felt to be inappropriate—and in some cases frightening and damaging. There was a strong consensus among the participants that teachers should model the

good behaviour they demanded of students. Two forms of unprofessional behaviour among teachers were given specific attention by the participants: the use of alcohol, and sexual harassment of female students. In one activity during the forum, the participants were divided into four separate groups and asked to discuss the things that would make school a positive place for all children in Fiji. Each group independently identified teachers coming to school sober or not affected by alcohol or other stimulants as something that would improve the educational experience for students. While it is unclear from this study how widespread this problem is, it clearly warrants further investigation.

A second form of unprofessional behaviour—sexual harassment—was not raised directly during the forum, but was identified as a serious problem by eight of the 11 girls who participated in separate interviews. All eight girls who raised this issue described being aware of inappropriate comments made by male teachers about either themselves or other female students. Each of the eight girls had experienced suggestive comments from at least one male teacher or had heard suggestive comments made to a friend or classmate. All described feeling vulnerable and uneasy in the school environment—several expressed anger and disgust. Four of the girls who raised this issue noted that female teachers sometimes told them about the comments male teachers made and suggested they took care in their dress, appearance and behaviour. While the girls said that some female teachers were supportive and protective of them, in a significant minority of cases, they or their friends had experienced hostility from female teachers who blamed them for the behaviour of the male teachers. A specific issue of concern among the girls who raised the problem of sexual harassment is the design of their uniforms,



which in many schools take the form of white dresses. The girls explained that when these uniforms become wet—as is common during the rainy season—they become transparent. When this occurs, comments and inappropriate looks from some male teachers are exacerbated. As in the case of drunkenness, it is not possible to generalise the findings of this study across Fiji. This is, however, an issue worthy of research and policy consideration.

Children and young people's recommendations

In keeping with the objective of the study to contribute to a foundation for education policies and school practices that are able to progress the human rights and educational needs of all children, the forum provided an opportunity for the participants to discuss and identify recommendations for key stakeholders. The participants identified key stakeholders as: schools (school management committees and principals), the Ministry of Education, teacher training institutions, teachers, parents and families, NGOs and children. This section focuses on the participants' recommendations for schools, the Ministry of Education and teacher training institutions as they relate to the issues discussed above.

First, there was consensus among the participants that the Ministry of Education should take a proactive role in implementing policies and ensuring consistency among schools. This presents something of a challenge for the ministry in the context of the decentralised ownership of and control over schools. The participants felt that it was important to introduce measures to ensure that school management committees and principals were required to follow national policies and guidelines and were held accountable.

The recommendation for greater intervention on the part of the ministry was strongest in relation to corporal punishment. The participants found it incongruous that the ministry had banned corporal punishment but that the practice continued to be commonplace and widespread. There was a strong recommendation that the Ministry of Education take seriously the monitoring of corporal punishment and make periodic, unannounced visits to schools. There was a strong recommendation that school principals and school management committees be held accountable for the behaviour of teachers, and employ sanctions against teachers who used corporal punishment.

Participants were strongly of the view that corporal punishment was most likely to occur when teachers were frustrated or lost their temper. In response, participants recommended teacher training curricula include techniques for positive, non-violent forms of discipline and strategies to help teachers control their temper. One recommendation stated that '[t]eachers should be trained to handle children: not only knowledge of providing services but an understanding of how to nurture children. This should be part of initial training and on-going professional development.'

In relation to issues of unprofessional conduct on the part of teachers, two recommendations were particularly significant. First, there was a strong view among the participants that students should have greater opportunity to raise their concerns and have those concerns taken seriously. At present, there are few avenues through which a student can realistically complain about inappropriate behaviour on the part of teachers. As noted, in recent years, there have been legal proceedings against teachers accused of using corporal punishment. Such cases are relatively unusual, require proactive parents and are potentially costly and traumatic for all involved. While the



possibility of resorting to the legal system is important, it is not the most appropriate or productive means of dealing with the majority of issues that arise in schools, including most cases of corporal punishment.

The forum participants identified two ways in which students could have a say on important issues within the school and raise complaints about inappropriate behaviour by teachers. The first is the establishment of student representative councils in all schools. At present, such councils are not common and the main form of student leadership is prefects, who are chosen by teachers or principals. The majority of participants felt that prefects did not represent the interests of all students and in some cases their primary role was to implement punishment on behalf of teachers. The second suggestion was the establishment of 'voice boxes' in each school, which would allow students to write anonymously their concerns for the attention, consideration and action of the principal. The participants also called for teacher training curricula to focus on developing a professional ethic among teachers and provision of regular workshops, seminars and counselling programs for teachers. There was also a call for teachers to be held accountable for inappropriate behaviour.

Conclusion

The findings of the study discussed here have important implications for education policy and the policy objectives identified by the government. First, school is not currently a safe place for all children, given the extent and nature of corporal punishment. The risk that children will experience or be exposed to violence is significant. In such a context—considered by the participants in this study to be deeply unjust—the objective of promoting nation building through

social justice seems anomalous. The efforts of the ministry to end the use of corporal punishment have not, as yet achieved success and are unlikely to do so without an unambiguous policy framework. There is also a need for clearly focused interventions to foster change in the organisational culture of schools and among individual teachers and enhance the capacity of teachers to use alternative forms of classroom management. The challenges are considerable, particularly given the decentralised nature of the education system, and engaging the support of principals and school management committees is crucial.

Second, the development and support of a professional teaching force should have high priority given the serious issues identified here concerning the behaviour, attitudes and capacity of some teachers. In pursuing this objective, it will be important to recognise, reward and present as a model good practice among individual teachers, principals and schools. Revising and strengthening teacher training curricula represents one important strategy for change. Newly trained teachers, however, practice their profession within the organisational culture of a school. Without professional support and development for experienced teachers, clear guidelines from school management and sanctions when professional standards are breached, it is unlikely that significant change will occur.

A third implication of the findings of this study relates to gender issues. A stated policy objective is narrowing the attainment differences between boys and girls. Secondary school enrolment rates indicate that strategies to keep boys in school are necessary, as are strategies to encourage girls to continue post-secondary education. Beyond enrolment trends, however, the sexual harassment of female students by male teachers is a serious issue of gender-based discrimination that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.



Finally, the findings discussed here indicate that children and young people have important insights to bring to the development of education policy and the delivery of schooling. These insights are often different—and sometimes deeper—than those of adults, particularly policymakers who do not experience the ‘sharp end’ of education policy on a daily basis. Explicitly identifying schoolchildren as partners in efforts to strengthen the education system and raise learning achievements would be an important step in moving Fiji’s education policy agenda forward, improving teaching practices and achieving better learning outcomes.

The findings of this study indicate that working with children as partners and stakeholders illuminates the ways in which school is currently a negative experience for many children in Fiji. Such an approach also provides a foundation on which to develop policies and practices that support children not simply to remain in school, but to gain the most from their educational experience.

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