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THE CHALLENGES TEACHERS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA CONTINUE TO FACE

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Key Points

- The key to quality education is quality teachers.
- Teachers' needs have continued to be overlooked.
- Teachers' accommodation allowances need to be revised.
- In order for the new Standard-Based Curriculum to be successful in achieving quality learning, teachers must be upskilled in their respective fields of teaching.

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By Kilala Devette-Chee

Teachers are role models whose general attitudes, behaviours and presence can have a tremendous influence on students' social and emotional development. Teachers are key players in quality education. Their welfare in terms of salaries, accommodation, health and other appropriate personal support from the appropriate authorities will encourage them to serve the students in their charge well. School environments which are conducive to positive teaching can also encourage teachers to perform to the best of their abilities; thus, improve quality in teaching.

Quality teaching

It is generally assumed that quality teaching plays a major, if not the most important role in shaping students' academic performances. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), having quality teachers is of paramount importance. In the existing literature, quality teaching is neither a widely agreed upon nor uniformly accepted concept. Instead, it is defined very differently or is grounded in different assumptions. These differences can be seen in at least three perspectives associated with teachers' cognitive resources, their performances, and their effects. Wang (2002) elaborated on each of the perspectives as follows:

1. Quality teaching from a cognitive resource perspective is related to the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions teachers bring into the profession which includes the credentials one holds for teaching. Quality teaching is linked to one's competence as demonstrated on academic and professional tests, and such competence is presumably one of the central predictors for how a teacher becomes. Teachers' knowledge, skills and disposition are central predictors for quality teaching.
2. Quality teaching from the performance perspective refers to what teachers do in their practice. For example, it is assumed that the particular things that teachers do in their classroom teaching contribute to expected student learning. Assessing teachers' performance in the classroom is an important factor in evaluating and certifying teachers. A further notion linking teacher performance to quality teaching is that the myriad of experiences that teachers have both in and out of the classrooms contribute to the quality of students' learning.

3. The third perspective – quality teaching as effect – assumes that quality teaching is defined in terms of teaching outcomes. Notions arising from this perspective are apparent in debates about teaching reforms and policies. One reflects discussions about quality teaching in relation to the knowledge, skills, and values that students need to develop according to existing curriculum and assessment standards. A further notion grounded in the view of quality teaching as effect is that teachers can and should influence the knowledge, skills and values that students need in order to participate in a global economy.

Therefore, when teaching is not effective, students are blamed for not learning. Teachers' reflection on their teaching strategies is not generally practised in this case, and therefore, questions such as 'Did I teach the students well?' or 'Could I have taught this lesson better?' and 'How could I have improved my teaching strategy?' do not generally arise. The application of this theory in PNG classrooms may produce students who may not master basic and advance numeracy, literacy and life skills at the end of grade eight or advance skills taught at higher levels of education, because teachers are not reflecting on how well they assist the students to master skills.

Contributing factors to poor teaching quality

Much work has not been done on the quality and standards of teaching in PNG. According to the PNG Education for All 2015 National Review (National Department of Education, 2015), the National Department of Education (NDoE) was not able to provide information on the standards of classroom teaching or whether standards had substantially improved or declined in recent years which made it difficult to assess the impact of pre-service and in-service training.

The provision for in-service training and development in reality is limited and largely ad hoc due to inadequate funding. In the past, the government relied heavily on donors to finance teachers in-service training. Budget allocation for this work seriously remain inadequate. Furthermore, there are no structures or regular training posts at the provincial or district level to support teachers in schools other than the inspectorate which is not fully functional (World Bank, 2007).

The current challenge in PNG is the change from outcome-based curriculum (OBE) to Standard Base Curriculum (SBC). Therefore, when there is a change in a country's education curriculum, teachers are the cornerstone in implementing the curriculum successfully. Thus, they need training to be able to implement the curriculum accordingly. "At the moment, current teachers teaching in schools in PNG are products of outcome-based curriculum and it will take a while for them to adapt to the Standard Base Curriculum. The teachers' colleges have not trained teachers to teach using SBC. With new further training, better incentives should be provided for teachers as well" (Goro, 2021).

The quality of teaching is at stake nationwide

With regards to teachers out in the field, the quality of teaching is at stake nationwide due to the following factors:

Teacher absenteeism. Time on task is a critical determinant of the quality of education and it is reported that teachers are frequently absent from classes or are very late to attend. In many rural schools teachers may not be at schools for two to three days of a school week and in the case of many remote schools, for several weeks at a time. In most cases, teachers leave school to attend to administrative matters that have not been sorted out at district or provincial level (National Department of Education, 2009). Students' learning can progress well when teachers are present for classes every day. However, students are most likely to miss school when teachers are continuously being absent from school. Gaps in students' content knowledge occurs when teachers and students are absent from school regularly. Evidence from recent research shows that despite a minor improvement in teacher absent rates between 2002 and 2012, it is evident that teacher absenteeism in PNG is still a major issue that needs to be addressed.

Confirming this issue of teacher absenteeism is Howes et al. (2013) who reported that 70 percent of teachers had been absent for two days or more during the time of his survey. This is further supported by a report from *The National newspaper* (2014), which highlighted a warning from the Teaching Service Commission chairman to teachers in especially government schools throughout the country not to skip classes without valid reasons. The chairman was responding to claims by parents from the National Capital District about the high rate of absenteeism of teachers in government primary schools. One parent in particular reported that "in a week, two days the teacher is present and three days – no teacher". The parent further reported that "children play around all day or are sent home because there is no backup teacher, which means most teachers at the Community School and Elementary School do not take their jobs seriously". The two main factors which attributed

to the high rate of teacher absenteeism are: 1) teachers who live off the school grounds are highly likely to be absent than teachers who reside on the school grounds; and, 2) teachers' concern over pay translated into absenteeism (Howes et al, 2013).

Consequently, when students struggle in school due to knowledge gaps, they withdraw from school. Schools and relevant authorities that are responsible for monitoring teachers' school attendance must ensure that teachers are committed to their teaching duties. In order to minimise this attitude, teachers must be committed and strong willed in the teaching profession. A very high level of teacher absenteeism has a further negative impact on the learning process and, ultimately, on exam results which in turn, contribute to the falling standard of education in PNG.

Teachers' houses. In 2002, the World Bank and the National Research Institute (NRI) jointly undertook research into funding for, and the condition of schools and health facilities in the country. Following a wide-reaching quantitative survey (followed up in 2012), researchers conducted in-depth qualitative research with 12 schools in four provinces – the National Capital District (which incorporates Port Moresby), East New Britain, Eastern Highlands and Morobe. It was found that while there were numerous factors contributing to improved performance of schools, community involvement in school affairs was often crucial for success (Walton, 2013). Ten years later, NRI, this time with the Australian National University's (ANU) Development Policy Centre, revisited these 12 schools to see how they had fared. While there have been tangible improvements to infrastructure at these schools, much more is needed, one of which was teachers' houses. In some schools, the lack of teachers' housing was so acute. One school in particular, had a classroom that was transformed into sleeping quarters (Walton, 2013).

Teachers in remote schools. There are many parts of the country that are extremely remote and provinces have problems in delivering education services to these areas. Given the type of geographical features that PNG has which include rugged mountains and terrains, a number of initiatives are already in place, such as the remote schools allowance, to encourage teachers to serve in the more difficult parts of the country. There is also a new program to provide scholarships for teaching students from areas where there is a demonstrated shortage of teachers (Department of Education, 2009). However, teachers are reluctant to go to remote areas and poor motivation is partly responsible for high teacher turnover and shortages.

Some teachers who are entitled to disadvantaged school allowance do not get it. Disadvantaged school allowance is intended to encourage teachers to work in remote areas, but a significant percentage of teachers entitled to these allowances

do not receive them. This discourages some teachers from putting all their best in the profession. The end result is that the children within the remote areas either do not enrol and even if they do, they drop out more frequently due to the lack of quality education.

Conclusion

The paper highlighted evidence and issues that contributes to the challenges teachers are facing in PNG. It is hoped that the SBC which replaces the OBE will in the long run resolve the on-going issues teachers are facing by upskilling themselves in their various fields of expertise. Thus, to cater for a successful delivery of lessons taught in the new SBC which is now being rolled out nationwide.

Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that:

- There should be sufficient time allocation for each subjects, topics, courses, or units to ensure that sound mastery of planned desired outcomes are achieved at the recommended levels.
- Teachers should make good use of time allocated to each subjects, units, topics, or courses to teach content effectively. It is broadly agreed that the benchmark for hours committed to effective teaching each year is between 850 and 1,000 hours. Subjects taught at each level of education should be allocated sufficient time to allow for the mastery of skills at the recommended level which will form the basis for the next level of learning. There must be positive correlations made between instruction time and students' levels of achievement/ mastery at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.
- Teachers must minimise their absenteeism and execute regular, reliable, and timely assessment to improve learning and the achievement of the desired or recommended outcomes.
- Teachers' incentive packages in remote schools need to be revised and upgraded.
- Teacher's accommodation packages need to be reviewed.

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