

Effectiveness of School Strategic Planning: The Case of Fijian Schools

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Abstract—In Fiji, notable among the recent spate of educational reforms has been the Ministry of Education's (MoEs) requirement that all schools undertake a process of school strategic planning. This preliminary study explores perceptions of a sample of Fijian teachers on the way this exercise has been conducted in their schools. The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data indicates that school leaders' lack of knowledge and skills in school strategic planning is a major limitation. As an unsurprising consequence, the process(es) schools adopted did not conform to what the literature suggests as best planning practices. School leaders need more training to ensure they are better prepared to carry out this strategic planning effectively, especially in widening the opportunities for all who have a stake in education to contribute to the process. Implications of the findings are likely to be pertinent to other developing contexts within and beyond the Pacific region for the training of school leaders to ensure they are better equipped to orchestrate and benefit from educational reforms thrust upon them.

Keywords—School Strategic Planning, educational reforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the development of education systems, no matter where they operate, the area of planning is critical. This is true of strategic planning – or any other form of planning in education – for all education systems but particularly so for education systems in developing contexts, where progress toward improvement in the provision of an acceptable quality of education is a continuous and relentless struggle [1], [2]. Any education institution or system that fails to undertake educational planning in all seriousness, responding effectively to the manifold demands and rising expectations of various stakeholders in current times, does so at its peril [3]-[7]. In this regard, consulting with and encouraging the participation of all relevant stakeholders would seem a productive approach – for what community does not have a stake in the education of its youngest members, who are also its future? A legitimate aspect of school management, and one that could enlist community involvement successfully, is school strategic planning [7]-[9]. Seen in light of this significance of strategic planning in meeting varying demands and contributing to school effectiveness and improvement, the preliminary

investigation reported here begins to explore teachers' perceptions on the relatively unfamiliar territory of school strategic planning in Fiji, a small, developing, island nation in the southwest Pacific region.

In virtually all areas of human life, some level of planning, though often taken for granted, is in fact vital for individuals and communities as well as for nations. For any nation to improve all facets of its economy – including education – planning is of paramount importance. As one phrase neatly encapsulates it; '*everybody plans to succeed but many people fail to plan*' [1]. Thus planning is based on the belief that it promises enhanced success for all who plan. In short, apart from individuals, all nations whether small or large must plan in order to expedite the development of various sectors of the economy and in particular, the education sector, which, in turn, has the potential to contribute significantly to improvement in all sectors. Reference to developmental experiences in a number of developing countries has highlighted the fact that 'this [i.e. planning] is a stage no country or institution can afford to by-pass without risk of omissions or oversights in effect, and for the poorer Third World Countries, it is an absolute necessity which must always begin at the highest national level' [1]. The importance of planning for development encompasses the need for careful planning in education not only at the national level but also at the school level, to make it more efficient and effective and at the same time to meet the new demands of the 21st century [2], [6], [10].

The need for educational planning moved to centre stage when UNESCO initiated and developed regional educational plans such as the Karachi Plan for Asia in the early 1960s [1]. Later, nations of other regions, and particularly some of the developing nations, undertook educational planning as an important initiative within their development activities. [1] defined educational planning as: 'a process of preparing decisions for future actions in the field of education, decisions that take cognizance of prevailing policy, in an earnest attempt at arriving at informed decisions designed to enhance an integrated and equitable development and distribution of educational opportunities and life chances'. Likewise, as early as the 1970s, Coombs [11] defined educational planning as: 'The application of rational, systematic analysis to the process of educational development with the aim of making education more effective and efficient in responding to the needs and goals of its students and society'. Both definitions are comprehensive and they share a strong concern with considering essential elements in the process of educational

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planning so that the plan works toward the development of the education system and in turn of the nation as a whole.

School strategic planning is one form of planning that is slowly becoming an integral part of education, especially in some of the small island states of the Pacific, often as a spin-off from the pull-you push-you assistance of their overseas aid donors. The concept of strategic planning is a well-established buzzword in the business world, with enough success stories to its credit to legitimise application of the concept in education and other sectors of the economy as well [12]. Puffitt and his colleagues [13] define strategic planning as: ‘... a list of actions ordered so as to attain over a particular time period, certain desired objectives derived from a careful analysis of the internal and external factors likely to affect the organization, which will move the organization from where it is now to where it wants to be’. Through the strategic planning process schools could focus more sharply in their choice of goals, objectives and strategies for accomplishing those goals, helping to move the institution in an appropriate direction [10], [14]. Apart from this, a key aspect of strategic planning for schools is the opportunity afforded for grass-roots level engagement of stakeholders through consultation and participation in the planning process. However, in the Pacific, as in many jurisdictions, local participation in the education planning exercise has not been a tradition [15]. Generally, a centralised and elitist approach has been the norm, responsibility for construction of the plan falling to a selected few, especially of people higher in authority and social standing. It is interesting to note that as early as the 1970s, the major Karmel Committee national report on *Schools in Australia* (1973) urged the need for devolution of responsibility, equity, diversity, and choice in schooling – and beyond these, the need for community involvement [8]. The report stressed the rather novel idea that a grass-roots approach to the control of a school’s operation is vital to improving the school’s effectiveness. Encouraging community involvement – say, of parents and various interest groups – would pave the way for combined efforts toward educational improvements.

II. STRATEGIC PLANNING

A. Consultation and Participation

The literature strongly recommends consultation and participation with key stakeholders as an important part of the strategic planning exercise [7], [16]-[20]. At the school level, stakeholders such as parents, principals, teachers, students and the school management team as well as those who have an interest in children’s education should be consulted. Invitations could also be extended to community leaders and interest groups to participate in the school’s strategic planning process. Strong commitment to bottom-up rather than top-down processes and active participation of all education partners is vital in the planning process [2], [21]. Reference [16] forcefully asserted the need to involve in the planning decisions everyone concerned with the education service: ‘... one of the preconditions of planning for education is that

everyone engaged in the service, professionally or voluntarily should be involved in its planning’ [16]. Such an inclusive process is likely to yield better outcomes for schools and children who are the immediate beneficiaries of any educational plan. This will then contribute toward the principle of plan ownership, helping raise stakeholders’ level of commitment to implement the plan effectively. Reporting on the situation in the Pacific, [20] pointed out that in most cases relevant stakeholders are not consulted in the planning process and this is a serious limitation. Little involvement of relevant stakeholders is likely to discourage them from any sense of ownership of the plan, which could then adversely affect implementation. Puamau [20] observed that ‘Participation in and ownership of the planning process are important for the success of strategic plan implementation’. Likewise, [21] adds that ‘[Consultation] is highly important, as the recognition of [all stakeholders] and the valuing of their contributions ensures that they will have a strong sense of ownership of the plan, particularly important when they are the ones who will be involved with its implementation’. He extends this, indicating ‘the plan’s success is dependent upon the actions of key stakeholders ... They are more likely to support and contribute to its implementation if they are involved with planning from the earliest stages and believe it will have a positive impact on the organisation’. In view of the benefits to be achieved, school leaders should take note of the suggestions advanced in [20], [21] when undertaking school strategic planning exercise.

Betitin [22] has categorised the benefits of a participatory approach to planning (PAP) into three major groups: simplicity of the process involved; decentralisation of control; and its reliance on synthesis and inclusion to create vision. Thus PAP empowers stakeholders and emphasises bottom-up ideas by involving every interested stakeholder in the process [22]. In a nutshell, it may be said of successful strategic planning that it:

- must lead to action
- must build a shared vision that is value-based
- is an inclusive, participatory process, in which all staff members take on shared ownership
- accepts accountability to the community
- is externally focused and sensitive to the organisation’s environment
- is based on quality data
- maintains openness to questioning the status quo
- is a key part of effective management.

Apart from these features of successful strategic planning, other critical factors needed for effective strategic planning are leadership and management, commitment from the top management, a conducive climate for planning, participation of people, and clear communication to everyone [2]. Leadership and management are at the core, running through every phase of the entire planning process and duration of the plan. With effective leadership and a pleasant atmosphere can be created wherein all stakeholders contribute to the plan formulation and share in the decision-making. As mentioned by Stringer and Uchenick [23], there is ‘no substitute for the

vision, the dynamism, or the energy of the executive who can translate the right strategy into collaborative action'. On the contrary, ineffective leadership is likely to have an adverse effect on not only stakeholder collaboration but also the overall performance of the plan. Already in some educational contexts, such as in the Republic of Marshall Islands, school leaders' major challenge is the ability to engage the community especially in the educational planning process [24]. However, with strong and effective leadership, communities feel at ease and also keen to contribute wholeheartedly to the planning process [16], [17]. Thus school leaders should provide for the active participation of relevant stakeholders in order to plan effectively and efficiently.

B. Professional Preparation in Strategic Planning

It is helpful to consider suggestion in [25] that those intending to undertake strategic planning in education should be well versed in what it entails otherwise 'strategic planning [can be] in danger of becoming just an educational fad ... Some educators have borrowed a page from the industrialists' book and embrace it – often without a clear idea of what it is, what it should deliver, and how it differs from other types of planning'. As a starting point are some of the basic questions [21], [26] that need to be asked and addressed in strategic planning: Where are we going? Where do we want to be? How do we get there? How will we know when we have arrived? These questions may appear simple but they may still be problematic. School leaders in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), for instance, encountered difficulties in satisfactory strategic planning despite its terminological disguise as School Improvement Planning [27]. Clearly, significant prior training of educational leaders at all levels is called for: central figures in the planning process, they are required to lead and manage the process. Reference [10] notes that the challenges of the strategic planning process are particularly apparent in contexts where it has not previously been a part of professional work at the school level. In general, planning in education is something done at the central office of the education ministry and then passed down to the lower echelons of the education hierarchy for execution. In fact, education in the Pacific is still very much a manifestation of education systems of the colonial masters. Much has changed in the education systems of metropolitan countries, yet the SIDS (small island developing states) in the Pacific still cling to most of the structures and processes of education common during the colonial era [20].

C. Strategic Planning for Schools in Fiji

School strategic planning was formally introduced into Fiji in 2009 [28]. A key component of that plan is its laying out of priority areas. These priority areas fall into four broad categories determined by the FMoE: Learning and Teaching; Community Partnership; Leadership and Management; Infrastructure Development [28]. Within these categories, individual schools determine the specific areas they will concentrate on for improvement. For each of the priority areas the goals and objectives are articulated, providing the

reference points against which the performance of the plan can later be ascertained. Strategies for achieving these goals and objectives are specified and performance indicators spelled out. In addition, resources, timeframe and people responsible for various activities are assigned. The FMoE recommends that all schools in Fiji prepare a three-year strategic plan, which would include priority areas needing attention and action over the three-year period [28]. This plan would then become a useful document influencing educational development and improvement at the school level. Instead of doing things on an ad hoc basis, a school strategic plan would provide a blueprint and a clear focus in promoting children's education at each school.

What emerged from the earlier review of literature is that strategic planning is considered a sound way to plan for educational development at the school level. The key theme that emanates is the need for adequate consultation with and participation of relevant stakeholders in the planning process. The introduction of school strategic planning, therefore, gives an opportunity for grass-roots participation in educational planning, which hitherto was conspicuously lacking. Above all, the literature illustrates that school effectiveness and improvement are enhanced when schools execute well thought-out strategic plans.

III. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Fiji, now formally known as the Republic of the Fiji Islands, is located in the South Pacific and is made up of two large and some 300 small islands, only about one-third of them permanently inhabited. The land area of about 18,270 square kilometers is dispersed across an EEZ of 1,290,000 square kilometers. The scatter, geographical separation and isolation of communities have contributed to the number of small schools and too many severe educational challenges unimaginable in the metropolises of the developed world. The most remote island is Rotuma, which is about 400 kilometers away from the capital city, Suva, far enough to merit inclusion on most maps as a different-scaled inset (and that often almost as an afterthought).

According to the 2006 census, Fiji has a population of about 850, 000. The population consists of several ethnic groups, with indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) and Indo-Fijians being the two major ones. In addition, there are several other significant minority groups, including but not limited to Rotuman, Chinese and Banaban. The Indo-Fijians are mainly the descendants of the indentured labourers whom the British brought from India in the late 19th Century to provide labour for the fledgling sugar industry. Fiji's annual population growth rate is about 1 per cent. According to [29] a country with a population not exceeding 1.5 million is a small country. By this definition, Fiji is a small country, and with limited financial resources, faces difficulties in meeting the competing demands of the various sectors of the economy. After the achievement of independence in 1970, demand for schooling rose because of the growing economic importance attached to the education system as a source of skilled manpower [30]. As a result, numbers of schools were set up in various parts of the

country to provide easy access for school-age children throughout the country.

A sizeable proportion (about 20%) of Fiji's schools can trace their origin, and still owe their existence, to the initiatives of Christian missions and later of various socio-religious organisations. The prominent Christian missions included from the start the Wesleyan Methodists and the Catholics though other denominations followed. Some of the socio-religious organizations are the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, the Then India Sanmarga Ikyo Sangam, the Fiji Sikh Society, the Gujarat Society of Fiji and the Fiji Muslim League. In addition to these, a number of school 'committees', which represent a locality or an interested group of people or association, were responsible for the setting up of schools. Table I shows the different controlling authorities that own and run both primary and secondary schools in Fiji. This illustrates a partnership between the government and the non-government organisations in the provision of education. Such a partnership calls for even greater collaboration in school strategic planning.

Before 1970, when Fiji became independent, a low percentage of school-aged children went to school, but the post-independence period has seen a vast increase in the numbers attending schools throughout country, reflecting an increase in the number of schools established as well as overall growth in population size. Even remotest settlements have schools and teachers are likely to be the only civil servants found there. At present, the majority of the schools, both primary and secondary, are owned and run by non-government organisations.

The rising demand for education has opened opportunities for various providers to help with education provision in the country. In the future this ongoing trend is likely to gather momentum rather than diminish. One thing clearly demonstrated is parents' concern for the education of their children; this positive power can be better used and accommodated if parents are encouraged to take part in schools' strategic planning.

TABLE I
CONTROLLING AUTHORITIES OF SCHOOLS IN FIJI

Controlling Authorities	Primary	Secondary
Committees	529	73
Religious Organisations	130	54
Cultural Organisations	36	11
Special Education Societies	14	-
Private	4	1
Fijian Affairs Board	-	1
Rabi Council	-	1
Rotuma Council	-	1
Government	2	12
TOTAL	715	154

Source: [28].

A. Research Method

Data collection was carried out using a specially designed questionnaire, the instrument widely endorsed as an effective

means of gathering data from a sample scattered all over the nation. Participants in the survey sample, all practicing teachers, were studying a USP postgraduate course on educational planning, which includes a topic on strategic planning.

The questionnaire consisted of a two-part survey to determine teachers' reflections on school strategic planning processes undertaken in their respective schools. In the first part, the respondents were required to rate each given statement, indicating their level of agreement-disagreement on a four-point Likert scale ranging from one (the lowest agreement) to four (the strongest agreement). These items were drawn from the best practices in the educational planning literature, after the Ministry of Education document on school strategic planning had been consulted to determine the ministry's general aims and objectives. In addition, the questionnaire was prepared on the basis of the author's work experience in strategic planning. The data thus collected helped to assess the effectiveness of the school strategic planning process. The second part of the survey provided the respondents ample opportunity to express their views on what they expect to see in future school strategic planning in light of their previous experience and also on the basis of the knowledge and skills acquired from the educational planning course.

As part of research ethics, consent was obtained from the teachers about their willingness to participate in the study and assurance was given that the data collected were only for the purpose of research and participants' confidentiality and anonymity fully protected [31]. They were told that they could refuse to participate at any point during the research and could also refuse to answer any question with which they were uncomfortable. It is interesting to note that all the Fijian teachers (43) taking the course agreed to participate in the study and the return rate of the completed questionnaire was 100 per cent. All the participants in the study had been teaching for over a decade. The qualitative data collected were analysed on the basis of themes that emerged from the responses [31] and the quantitative data were analysed using common statistical analysis techniques, in this case means and standard deviation.

B. Quantitative Data

The summary of the quantitative data (Table I) illustrates that eight of the fifteen statements were rated above the mean of 2.5. But even though the ratings were positive, they were barely above the mean of 2.5. As shown in Table II, teachers accorded relatively higher ratings to the school management's commitment to planning. Ratings for seven statements were below the mean of 2.5. These are, for example, stakeholder satisfaction with the plan, time for meetings, atmosphere for planning and collaboration with stakeholders (Table II).

C. Qualitative Data

Analysis of teachers' suggestions for future school strategic planning produced results indicative of an overwhelming need for more training in school strategic planning (95 per cent)

followed by boosting stakeholders' participation in the planning process (90 per cent), doing proper SWOT analysis (76 per cent) and ensuring that meeting times are convenient for all (63 per cent).

TABLE II
RESPONSES FROM PARTICIPANTS

Statements	Group Mean	Standard Deviation
School leader is well versed with what a school strategic plan entails	2.5	0.44
Community participation was encouraged	2.5	0.35
All my colleagues participated in the planning process	2.5	0.49
I took active part in the planning process	2.4	0.23
Planning was carried out collaborately	1.9	0.18
Through consensus and compromises we arrived at the final product, the plan	2.3	0.56
Everyone was treated equally in the planning process	2.4	0.54
There was effective communication with all stakeholders	2.5	0.47
The atmosphere for planning was pleasant	2.4	0.53
There was commitment from the school management for planning	2.7	0.41
The time for meetings was suitable to all	2.4	0.46
My school strategic plan is a realistic one	2.5	0.56
All stakeholders are satisfied with the plan	2.0	0.39
All that we have planned has been implemented	2.6	0.35
The plan is based on quality data after carrying out SWOT analysis	2.5	0.48

Comments accompanying the school leaders' experience in school strategic planning included: 'We can do better but we need training programmes'; 'Ministry of Education should conduct more workshops in all education districts so that they know how the plan is to be made'; 'We had to get help from other schools and teachers so I suggest more training for leaders'; 'My school principal had no idea about school strategic planning. He has not attended any workshop or training programme. Training for school leaders will help our school'; 'Training should be provided to all staff before the school strategic plan is prepared'.

Almost all teachers commented on the need to involve all stakeholders in the planning process; surprisingly, even some of the teachers mentioned that they did not know how the school's strategic plan was prepared. One teacher noted that, 'we did not know what was happening and how they derived the plan which became our school plan and in future we should be allowed to participate'. Other typical comments about the notion of the participatory approach to planning included for example: 'involve all stakeholders to come up with a realistic plan'; 'not all stakeholders like teachers, members of the school management and community were present when we were formulating our strategic plan, they should all take part'; 'a more participatory approach which will give us more ideas on how to come up with a good school strategic plan'; 'All members should participate in planning unlike at present when only selected people are asked to attend'; 'Participation from everyone will enhance cooperation and ownership of the plan by all'. This sentiment about

participatory approach to planning was repeated among almost all the respondents.

The other important area that showed up as needing to be considered in future strategic planning exercises is situational analysis. Comments included, for example, 'situational analysis was not properly carried out ... things not covered in the previous plan were included without looking at the current situation in the school'; 'we should collect relevant data to prepare the plan'.

Another important suggestion advanced by most teachers was to conduct meetings at a time that is convenient to all stakeholders. These are some of their comments: 'The time for future meetings should be suited to all'; 'We had to rush in most cases because people had to go. Time should be suitable to everyone'.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study is about teachers' perceptions on school strategic planning. The research study offers interesting insights into the perceptions of teachers on school strategic planning. With the educational arena in constant search of ways to improve the provision of education through reforms, it becomes imperative to undertake research studies to determine the effectiveness of the reforms introduced. School strategic planning is a top-down, driven reform and since schools are mandated to furnish their plans to FMOE, this could be a reason underlying what is perceived as management's high commitment (Table II). School leaders should be at the forefront of any educational reform. However, in this study school leaders did not receive a very favorable rating (Table II) and also the responses to the open-ended questions from the teachers indicated the need for school leaders to be better prepared for work required in school strategic planning (Summary of qualitative data). This could go to show the need for more professional development to ensure school leaders are knowledgeable and at the same time competent in carrying out the process of strategic planning for schools [10], [21], [27], [32]. In fact, the analysis of the responses demonstrates a near total agreement on the need to train school leaders. This lack of training is doubtless a contributing factor in the dismal performance of the school heads, because they appeared to know little about strategic planning. If this is so, the final product, the plan, runs the risk of becoming just another educational fad [32]. The summary of quantitative data shows that some of the best practices of strategic planning were not applied. As a consequence, this may have contributed towards a low rating for most of the items.

Also, the study showed unanimity or near-unanimity on the necessity for participation of stakeholders (Table I) and suggestions for participation in future school strategic planning. For example, analysis of both kinds of data show lack of collaboration with stakeholders, whereas good practice would encourage more collaboration with relevant stakeholders on school strategic planning [4], [10], [20], [21]. This is vital in terms of plan ownership and at the same time in implementation of the plan [2].

In terms of *best practice* in educational planning, we contend that school strategic planning should not be a unilateral endeavor spearheaded by a few people such as head teachers and principals, but rather a collective endeavor by all who have a vested interest in children's education. The teachers' voices, for example, must be given a hearing at least in the category of Learning and Teaching, because this area directly affects them as well as being the arena of their principal activity. Marginalising some teachers from the exercise could mean lack of support from them during plan implementation.

If the teachers are able to participate in at least decisions that directly affect them, they would feel satisfied and feel that they too have some say in whatever is done at school. Thus participation in planning decisions would make the staff feel satisfied and in turn motivated to contribute towards whatever is planned. Also, parents' voices must be recognized to ensure their ongoing support in providing resources required for running schools. In the case of Fiji, parents, increasingly recognized as partners in education, should be kept in healthy partnership with the schools for the good of all in education. In contemporary times, parents are becoming knowledgeable about various educational matters. In this regard, they may be useful in decision making in areas that are not strictly educational but affect the school work in some way, such as infrastructure development. Through the involvement of relevant stakeholders, their demands, opinions, expectations and reactions, as well as their knowledge and experience, relating to any of the broad categories (Learning and Teaching, Community Partnership, Leadership and Management, and Infrastructure Development) can be considered and planned for, provided they are afforded opportunities for participation. Without them the schools may have difficulties making any significant progress in some or all dimensions [2], [6].

Based on the feedback, from both quantitative and qualitative data sets, it can be concluded that the respondents generally agreed that the school strategic planning process needed more attention. For now, it could be considered as moderately effective or an indication that strategic planning is a path worth following.

V. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the number of schools in Fiji (Table I) the sample size is considered small. This is recognised as a limitation for generalisability of the research findings. Thus, we present the findings acknowledging they represent a limited, albeit important, snapshot of the effectiveness of the school strategic planning exercise. Given the research purpose of determining the effectiveness of school strategic planning we contend that the survey and the survey items were most appropriate. Although we cannot claim the findings sufficiently represent all schools, the data at least provide some unique glimpse of the *ground realities* about strategic planning in the operation of schools.

Since school strategic planning considers grassroots participation rather than participation spearheaded by people

in higher authority or officials who are far-removed from the classroom and the school context, it is highly desirable to engage local stakeholders in determining a school's strategic plan. Of course, introducing a reform is one thing, and to see its practical implementation is yet another.

The perceptions of these professional teachers studying a postgraduate course in education planning are important and the results of the study cannot be dismissed. These workers at the coalface have expressed their views on the current state of play in Fiji's employment of the school strategic planning model and also emphasised how future school strategic planning could be strengthened to make planning a truly worthwhile endeavor. The MoE officials and even development partners would do well to take heed of the findings of the study of this small sample; the findings also have implications for further research. Follow-up research is recommended, with these teachers especially, to see how they have been able to contribute to formulation and implementation of their school's strategic plan after completing the course on educational planning. More empirical research is also needed in other areas of educational planning in the Pacific to create a broader knowledge base for educational planning and other aspects of the educational endeavor.

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