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The motif on the cover is based on a nineteenth century carving of a ship's prow from Choiseul, Solomon Islands. To *Directions: Journal of Education Studies*, it signifies forward movement.

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Research Articles

‘Read like champions’: The use of sports role models to read story books for class three children at a Fiji school

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Abstract

This study utilized sports champions, those that have represented Fiji at the national level in various sports, to read aloud for a class three at a Suva primary school. Focus groups of five pupils and another of five champion readers were held. Feedback were also taken from the class teacher and head teacher. A qualitative study, a thematic analysis was employed and the study found that the *read like champions* project complemented existing reading programs in an innovative way that was highly anticipated by school children, provided inspiration and was thoroughly enjoyed. The rapport and cordial relationship among school leadership, the class teacher, librarian, sports champions, researchers and parents had also provided a conducive environment for reading and literacy activities, which enabled learning to occur. In addition, by integrating the reading activities with other subjects and events helped provide relevance and kept pupils interested. A novel idea not having implemented in the Fiji context before, the use of elite sportspersons to read aloud has the potential for stimulating improved reading and a love for reading among school children.

Introduction

“Literacy was introduced to the islands of the South Pacific by the missionaries who converted people to Christianity and taught them to read the Bible” (Moore, 1986, p. 6). The mission schools were the beginnings of formal schooling. The missionaries coming into Fiji in 1835 aimed to convert Fijians to Christianity and to do so, a major vehicle was to ensure the people were literate. Thus, formal schooling was introduced mainly of literacy and numeracy but mostly the ability to read in order that they read the Bible. There was a link between Christianity and literacy. In those early years, literate behavior could be seen from individuals being able to read the Bible and other religious materials and were also able to write notes to each other (Mangubhai, 1995).

Nandan (1979), in the Fiji context, wrote that books “deal with both the life of the imagination and of the daily reality, they often sharpen our sense of what is important in life and help us to go beyond the barbed-wire fences of our own limited environment. Books enlarge life. We get new insight into our own problems and occasionally into the problems of others which finally turn out to be our own” (p. 38). Both the indigenous and immigrant populations in Fiji have very rich folklores, myths and legends that can be turned into children’s reading books. Nandan remembers fascinating stories older people told while they were grazing their cows and goats at the village and unfortunately many of those elders would have passed away. Recording these legends and myths are important to getting Fiji children to interpret their world and the mystery called life (Nandan, 1979).

Tamata (2000) stressed that Fijians have an oral art and story-telling tradition from which an understanding of the humour and popular expressions reflect the people, life and society. Short stories and jokes can be heard from Fiji radio stations and had also been recorded by South Pacific Recordings on tape and sold and often sent as gifts to Fijians living abroad, who may miss Fijian stories and jokes. The Fijian newspaper *Nai Lalakai* has a section that has short humorous stories (Tamata, 2000). Tamata (2000) also expressed that some of the stories have become community idioms such as the Rotumans would be teased with *bisikete* because when biscuits were brought to

the island for the first time, the islanders planted some so that they would not be in short supply. Moreover, there are gifted story-tellers in the Fijian communities but waning somewhat as they are distracted by various village activities including fundraisers, school and church activities, while the listeners have now homework, TV, videos, video games, rugby and other amusements to be part of (Tamata, 2000).

Thus, story-telling and listening to stories is not a new idea in the Fiji context. In schools, the notion of reading aloud to children is a reading and pedagogical tool and Acosta-Tello (2019) stressed that reading aloud to pupils is pertinent to language and reading development. This study uses elite Fiji sports individuals to read aloud for school children. There have also been different manners in which elite sports persons were used to advocate for various issues. According to Bai (2018), a former Fijian professional rugby union player, the use of 'champions' and role models are powerful and add value to reaching children. Brought up by his mother, Bai admitted the lack of a father-figure and role model, but desired to succeed for his family. Through rugby, he learned a lot of values that can be transmitted to the younger generation (Bai, 2018). Cabenatabua (2018) added that after retiring from professional rugby in 2016, Bai started a rugby academy that catered for children from underprivileged backgrounds, providing a sense of purpose, belonging, and care. Bai aims to develop youngsters not only as players but also as persons (Cabenatabua, 2018).

Kisapai (2018) described the use of sports 'champions' in Papua New Guinea, in that as a former national hockey player, he was utilized to use sport as a means to advocate for the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14: Life below water. He conducts talks, sport events, deliver the Olympic values education program and uses the radio to pass important messages (Kisapai, 2018). In addition, Rikis (2018), a former national netball representative of Papua New Guinea, advocated for SDG 6: clean water and sanitation. Rikis also commented on her commitment to give back to society (Rikis, 2018). Conservation attempts to protect the falling stocks of *kawakawa* (grouper) and *donu* (coral trout) fish have utilized Senimili Turner, the iron lady of Fiji powerlifting, to champion the protection of these rapidly declining fish types (Fiji Sun, 2019). Turner stressed that she enjoyed fishing while at Taveuni and these fish are popular, thus, they cannot be overfished and be allowed to breed, as it has implications for the food security, livelihoods and culture of Fiji communities (Fiji Sun, 2019).

In terms of studies that use elite sports athletes to encourage reading and improved literacy, there were two that this study noted. The first is the '*Read like a demon*' literacy program (Fulco & Lee, 2010; Monash University, 2015) by the Faculty of Education of Monash University in Australia. In their program, Monash University partnered with a local Australian Football Club called the demons to read books and run workshops with primary school children with the aim to help instill a love for reading and ultimately envisaged to improve the literacy levels of students. Australian Football is a very popular sport in Melbourne and AFL players provide positive role modelling for pupils. The program complements the classes' existing reading programs rather than replace them (Fulco & Lee, 2010; Monash University, 2015).

Soccer's premier league in England also has a community program known as the *Premier League Reading Stars* (Premier League, 2015) which aims to stimulate literacy engagement among children aged 9 to 13. It is recognized that with improved literacy it would in turn have an impact on their improved attainment in other subjects as well. In addition, the use of premier league stars helped influence struggling readers to improve to expected levels of literacy (Premier League, 2015). Frank Lampard, a star footballer and who had written a series of children's books himself, launched the reading program in 2015 and 19 premier league footballers acted as 'reading stars'. The program helped children succeed at school as reading is critical to learning in any subject (Premier League, 2015).

The 2018 Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA), which was administered by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) to about 40,000 class 4 and 6 pupils and to 15 Pacific Island Countries and States (PICS), including Fiji, found that there has been improvement in the literacy and numeracy proficiency levels of children, as they had previously undertaken similar large scale studies in 2012 and 2015 (Moceituba, 2019). While there had been improvements, it was noted that there were still a noticeable number of children struggling (Moceituba, 2019), which requires as many innovative ideas as possible to continually encourage improved literacy amongst pupils and this study advocates the use of sports champions as role models to encourage a culture of reading. Thus, the research question for this study was: How could elite Fiji sports champions influence pupils' interest in reading?

Theoretical Framework

This study encompasses Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters' (2015) motivational theory of role modeling, where the role model has three functions: acting as behavioral models, representing the possible, and being inspirational. *Role models as behavioral models* describes "those from whom we learn particular skills and behaviors" (Morgenroth et al., 2015, p. 3). It refers to those who have been successful in their profession and are worth emulating. In this study, it views elite Fiji sports persons as individuals who would have acquired and refined skills from demonstration, practice and role modeling to be representing the country in their various sports. Such attributes can potentially provide motivation for role aspirants or class three pupils in this study. The second function of role models in this framework is *role models as representatives of the possible* who represent the belief that a potential goal is achievable and possible. They provide role aspirants the impetus that 'you can do this'. In this study, it means participating pupils can build the confidence for regular reading and that the love of reading is achievable and possible. This function is not about how something needs to be done but that it is possible and achievable. Role models are seen to provide the motivation that goals can be achieved (Morgenroth et al., 2015). The third function of role models in this framework is *role models as inspirations* which "focuses on how role models can influence what it is role aspirants see as desirable and worth striving for" (Morgenroth et al., 2015, p. 4). This function is not concerned about what is desirable and possible but about making something new desirable. Role models inspire and excite admiration in order that role aspirants aim towards something new or better than before. It is envisaged in this study that role models would expose pupils to aim to be better readers and enjoy reading.

Methodology

Logistics

Marking the International Day of Literacy, the Faculty of Arts, Law and Education (FALE) of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji, advertised small FJD\$1,000 literacy projects that schools in its member countries can apply for. USP is co-owned by 12 island countries, namely, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The authors collaborated to apply and won one of ten literacy projects out of thirty applicants. The project was won while the lead author was an Assistant Head Teacher at Suva Primary School in 2018. By implementation, she had been promoted as Head Teacher at another primary school in 2019. The authors had asked permission from the Fiji Ministry of Education to implement the project at Suva Primary School so permission was retaken for the project to be conducted at the new school.

Getting the 'sport champion' readers was a logistic challenge. However, authors eventually got in contact with coordinators of the Voices of the Athletes (VOA) program of the Fiji Association of Sport and National Olympic Committee (FASANOC), who helped us connect with other elite sports persons of Fiji. The VOA is a platform for elite athletes, former and current, to speak about messages

pertinent to them and in reaching out to society as role models. The other logistics issue authors had was that the Fiji Ministry of Education requires all who enter schools to deliver programs to be Fiji Teachers Registration Authority (FTRA) registered and the funding received would not be able to cover the cost of those processes. Therefore, authors attempted recruiting 'champion' readers who are already FTRA-registered, as some would already be involved in sport development work in schools. Other champions were registered later by FASANOC for their own activities that they would be conducting at schools but became useful to this project.

The authors held regular meetings to review what is happening with the project as researchers. After three sessions, for instance, we decided to help reorganize the classroom to allow more space during the reading sessions in consultation with the class teacher. When champions read, pupils converge on their mat in front of the class to listen to champion readers and later disperse into group activities related to the story book. Authors also discussed acquiring a book stand for readers to place the books while reading. However, authors could not locate any from the local bookshops. The class teacher had to go on maternity leave after two weeks of the start of the reading program and a different teacher had to come in as replacement which caused initial disjointedness but it eventually went well to the end of the study. When the class teacher was absent due to an illness or other reasons, the librarian replaced her.

Champion Readers

The champion readers have all represented Fiji in various sports. The first reader is Fiji's goalkeeper in women's soccer and pupils gathered on their mat in front of her excited to listen to the book being read aloud. She read a book titled *Dora's egg* and children reacted to the emotions of the story.

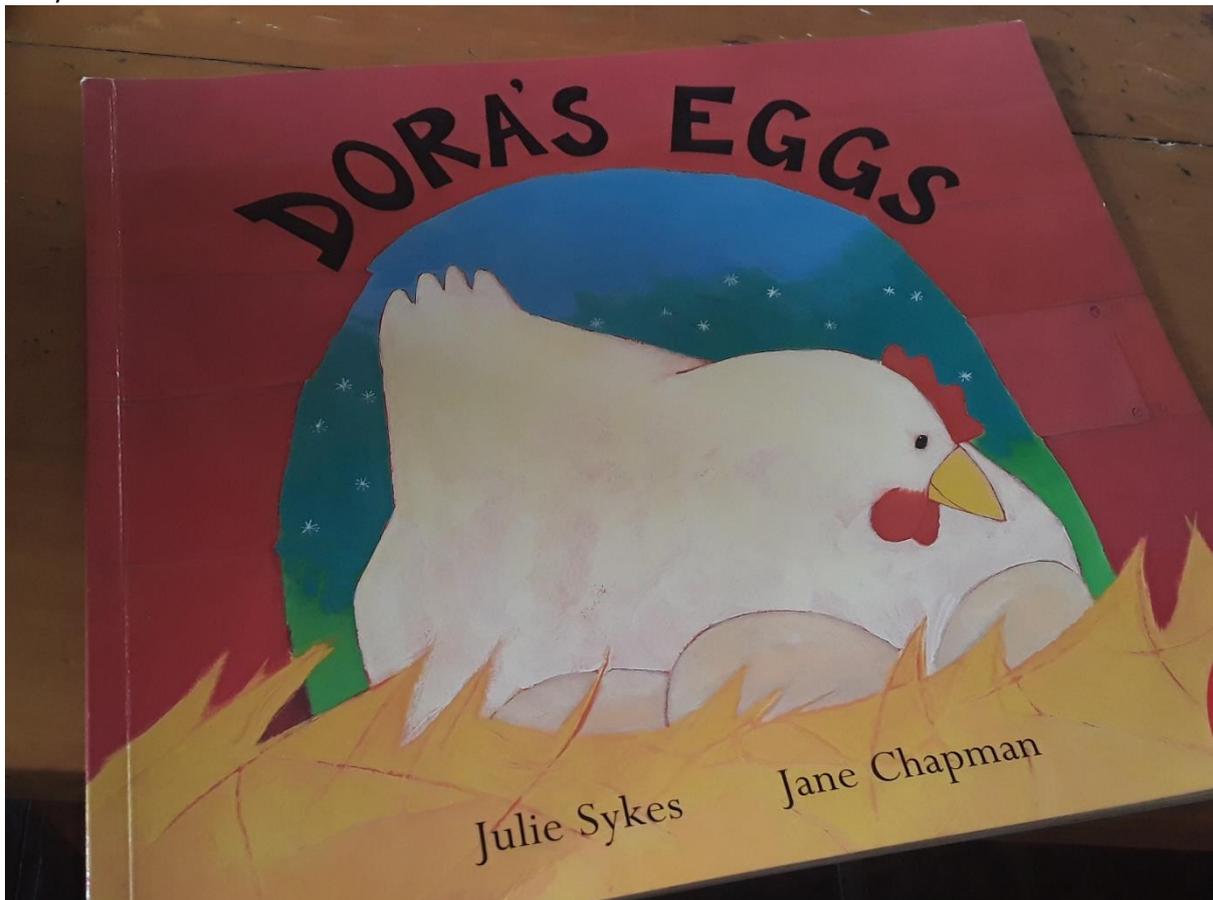


Figure 1. *The first book being read in the study to class threes.*

Other readers were the women's national center-back in soccer who read the book *bear feels scared*, a national hockey player read *sleeping beauty*, and a national cricket player read the book *jungle*. A national volleyball representative, read two books *A Head full of Stories* and *Cinderella*, while a dual representative for football and rugby, read *The Three Wishes* and *Maisy goes camping*, a para-shot putter, read the book *My Amazing Dad*, while others read more books into the program. Authors were not involved in the classroom activities except for the champions and class teacher, even though they may be present at the classroom or school.

Focus Groups

This study had two focus group interviews, one with a group of five pupils in the classroom held at the school and the other with five champion readers. The champions' focus group was held at a café balcony. The main reason authors used the focus group was to ensure there is conversation, debate and discussions among participants (Adams, Khan, Raeside, & White, 2007) rather than a one-way dialogue as would be in an individual interview. The school teacher picked the five pupils for the focus group while authors had the champion readers who were available. The focus group with pupils took approximately forty minutes while the session with elite sportspersons was for an hour. Focus group questions for the class three pupils were: a) What have you learned from the reading program with sports champions? b) Were you able to relate things to your own real-life experiences? c) Have you been encouraged to read more than you did before? The focus group questions for the champion readers were: a) Have you enjoyed your time with the class three pupils? b) How do you think you may have influenced the children? and c) if this reading program is to be done again, how do you think we could improve?

The focus group interviews were efficient ways of eliciting data from several participants simultaneously (Adams et al., 2007). Adams et al. (2007) also stressed that focus groups need to be composed of a homogenous population such as the same class level, experience, age and so forth. In this study, participants are from the year 3 class that were in the study and the second focus group consists of champion readers who were involved in the project. Moreover, it is important to guide the discussions to relevant issues and to ensure all participants had a voice. It is also advised to have two facilitators in the focus group and one who will be the main facilitator of the discussions and the other to organize the recordings and note taking (Adams et al., 2007). In this study, both authors were at the two focus group interviews and permission was taken to record the sessions via audio and video recordings. Punch (2001) pointed out that even though it is termed group focus interviews, the researcher is not necessarily an interviewer but a moderator or facilitator who should utilize the interaction to produce data that would have not been possible without the group conversation. This entails stimulating conversations of participants' views, perceptions, motives, reasons and opinions on the topic or issue (Punch, 2001).

Data Analysis and Findings

This study utilizes a thematic analysis (Gray, 2014) which involves identifying patterns or themes in qualitative data, in this case, from focus group discussions and email communications from the class teacher and head teacher. The data analysis in this study is inductive (Gray, 2014) in that themes emerged from the data itself rather than being deductive and based on an established theory or framework. However, with thematic analysis the data is coded against the research question in order to meet the objective (s) of the study. A thematic analysis, according to Gray (2014), consists of the following phases:

- a) To familiarize oneself with the data and in this study, authors transcribed focus group discussions themselves. Furthermore, authors also read and re-read transcripts and had general conversations around initial ideas.

- b) The second phase involved generating initial codes, which are interesting features of the data and this was done throughout the data. An example of coded work on one of the participants is given in table 1 below:

Table 1

Initial coding of data.

| Coding Labels | Participant | Notes and Ideas |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| | Champion Reader 1 | |
| Fun and Enjoyment. | Yes, it was <u>very enjoyable</u> . Aaahhh ... I speak for myself. It's not often, <u>not everyday you get children to sit down and actually listen to someone reading or actually pay attention</u> to the book itself eh. And I think what | I think there is newness in both kids and readers in the experience. |
| New experience. | motivated me to join the project was ... participate was eh.... The fact that ... ah.. I know growing up <u>the DEAR program</u> was in place but then ah.... I have cousins who | Reading then has implications for spoken English and writing skills. |
| Attention, concentration. | can't <u>speak fluent English and ahh..... they are mostly on their phones</u> and I guess that's why I ... I volunteered | |
| Technology use | myself to take part because it's <u>very odd to have children reading books nowadays</u> . And I guess the | |
| Supplement current programs. | literacy level has gone down now. You have people who are writing on paper ah... you know.... text kind of language. But when you would kind of <u>encourage them to read more</u> and And basically drove me to | |
| Importance of reading books. | participate. It was very enjoyable. I think it was interactive and the books <u>were very colourful</u> . Very bold for them it themselves as well. Yeah.... That's | |
| Encouragement. | basically my feedback on the program. | |
| Fun and Enjoyment. | | |
| Visual appeal | | |

- c) In the third phase, there is search for themes by putting coded materials into potential themes.
- d) The fourth phase involved reviewing the themes and there was one that was insufficiently populated so coded materials were shifted elsewhere. Moreover, there was a theme that had too many and a separate theme was created. A thematic map (Gray, 2014) was created as below:

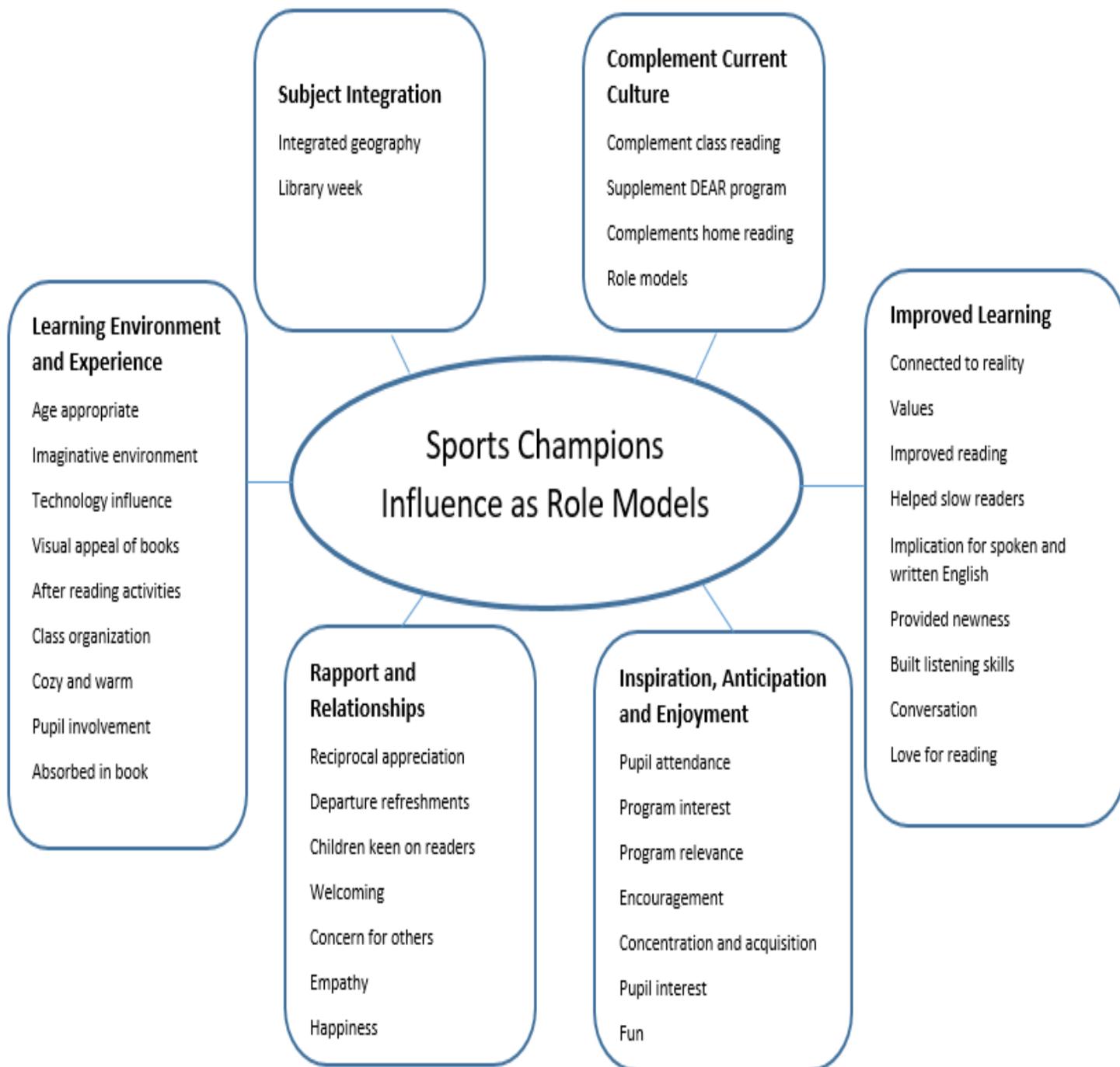


Figure 2: Thematic map.

The fifth phase involved defining the themes in order that there is clarity in what each theme entails and the story each tells and according to Gray (2014), should be done in only two sentences. The definition for each theme is provided below:

Table 2

Definition of themes.

| Themes | Definition |
|---|---|
| COMPLEMENT CURRENT CULTURE | This recognizes that the program adds to what has already existed in reading both at school and home. |
| IMPROVED LEARNING | There is learning manifested through improved reading, writing, listening, and conversation skills that is inclusive and relevant for slow readers, context and reality, and in instilling a love for reading. |
| SUBJECT INTEGRATION | This refers to incorporating other subjects and events that are relevant to the pupils' learning. |
| LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND EXPERIENCE | Age-appropriate books that are visually appealing accompanied by suitable after-reading activities, a cozy and warm classroom, and appropriate class organization, all contributed to a conducive learning environment and positive experiences for pupils. Furthermore, these also enabled maximal pupil engagement and that both pupil and readers were absorbed into the books themselves. |
| INSPIRATION, ANTICIPATION AND ENJOYMENT | Pupils enjoyed, had fun, were happy and encouraged, and constantly anticipated the reading program. Pupils were also inspired by the reading program, which increased their interest levels, motivation and consequently acquisition. |
| RAPPORT AND RELATIONSHIPS | Improved reading abilities occur if there are rapport and positive relationships among those involved such as the school management, readers, program coordinators, the school teacher, and pupils. These were displayed through reciprocal appreciations, an end of program party, empathy for each other, and being keen on readers, vice versa. |

The final and sixth phase as suggested by Gray (2014) involved selecting vivid and compelling extracts to depict the themes. The paper provides below two extracts, from a gamut of transcriptions, for each of the themes:

The program adds to what has already existed in reading both at school and home:

There was a culture of reading in place in the school which was further enhanced when sports champions were used. Thank you. It was noted that though their teacher was reading stories to them, they anticipated with great excitement the face of a new reading champion (Head Teacher).

I know growing up the DEAR {Drop Everything and Read} program was in place but then ah... I have cousins who can't speak fluent English and ahh.... they are mostly on their phones and

I guess that's why I ... I volunteered myself to take part because it's very odd to have children reading books nowadays (Champion Reader 1).

There is learning manifested through improved reading, writing, listening, and conversation skills that is inclusive and relevant for slow readers, context and reality, and in instilling a love for reading:

The slow readers are enjoying the session and are able to answer questions that are being asked after reading (Class Teacher).

And I like the fact that you bought that book after Fathers' Day, you bought that book, 'Amazing Dad,' and the next one is your Mum, like, to give five minutes peace to your mum. You know, everything got connected to their lives yeah (Champion Reader 2).

There was incorporation of other subjects and events that are relevant to the pupils' learning:

We were really excited about the maps. The world maps. We can tell where they went (Student 2).

I like the fact that we had the map and the geographical area the champions have gone to. Not only doing English and reading but also geography. Some of them haven't heard or been to those countries so we helped them locate those countries (Champion Reader 2).

Age-appropriate books that are visually appealing accompanied by suitable after-reading activities, a cozy and warm classroom, and appropriate class organization, all contributed to a conducive learning environment and positive experiences for pupils. Furthermore, these also enabled maximal pupil engagement and that both pupil and readers were absorbed into the books themselves:

So it was a great feeling seeing all their attention to the book and trying to get to know the story or the plot of the book. I think it was a good idea too to try and create conversations with them by reading the book (Champion Reader 3).

You know ... the environment itself was cozy. Everybody was sitting on the mat and we just have to hold the book and like It was a cozy environment on the first day. Yeah ... it was good and the children barely know us but I think on the first day and by the second day eh they would go _____! (Champion Reader 2).

Pupils enjoyed, had fun, were happy and encouraged, and constantly anticipated the reading program. Pupils were also inspired by the reading program, which increased their interest levels, motivation and consequently acquisition:

We were inspired by the champions. We were looking forward to the readings and when it's the last day we said No! (Student 1).

We wanted to read with more champs up to more like the end. Because Mrs ---- said it's for six weeks. So we said ok. And when sister ----- said we can call them after and we like yeah..... (Student 3).

Improved reading abilities occur if there are rapport and positive relationships among those involved such as the school management, readers, program coordinators, the school teacher, and pupils. These were displayed through reciprocal appreciations, an end of program party, empathy for each other, and being keen on readers, vice versa:

We've actually built that relationship with them. I went to drop the sandwiches and they can still remember your face. They come to you and said hello nicely. How are you? (Champion Reader 3).

Even when we're sitting outside, they would ask who's reading today? And I like the way they address us when we walk in... good morning, like in unison. Bye M...! M...! (Champion Reader 2).

Discussions

Complement Current Culture

A finding of this study is that it complements the current cultures of reading at the school and the program adds to what has already existed in reading both at school and home. In Fiji, there had been various reading and literacy interventions. In a *Book Flood* program implemented in Fiji in the 1980s for a control group and one that had the reading book supplied and utilized, there was an equivalent to one and a quarter worth of progress to those in the program compared to those that were not. Novelty should be emphasized, weak pupils identified, and remedial tasks implemented (Vakaruru, 1984). Vakaruru (1984) accentuated that literacy and English proficiency is important “because English provides a link between the different language communities in Fiji and a good knowledge of it is required in almost every career a child wishes to pursue” (p. 16). Vakaruru cautioned on the parrot-like drilling of oral lessons in Fiji classrooms and to explore opportunities for children to use the new language they have learned with peers and through relevant activities.

Another idea introduced in the late 80s was the *shared reading* which is a language approach to reading that had been implemented in Fiji schools that have shown to be effective. It involved reading interesting picture books to a class of pupils as the basis for discussion, creative activities and writing (Moore, 1990). In 1978, the Director of Education in Niue, Peter De'Ath, masterminded the *Fiafia* (fun) reading program at Niue (Elley, 1995). The *Fiafia* was implemented to class 3 pupils at Niue primary schools using the *Shared Book Approach*, which entails introducing a new blown-up book which is read aloud to children and accompanied by a variety of activities including discussing the pictures and story line, having pupils to read, deal with hard words and phrases, and other follow up activities. Elley (1995) found that the Shared Reading Approach was a success both at Fiji and Niue and that the *Fiafia* program brought about “dramatic improvements in their children’s reading comprehension, word recognition, oral language, and their interest in reading” (p. 54).

The South Pacific Commission created the *Ready to Read Series* that was delivered in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu, between 1988 to 1990 (Moore & Lumelume, 1991). The *Ready to Read Series* did change the mindsets of many teachers particularly those with very authoritarian teaching styles. Moore and Lumelume (1991) emphasized the importance of teachers in the success of literacy programs as good books and guidelines would not be enough in themselves. Thus, teacher professional development is essential whenever an idea is being introduced (Moore & Lumelume, 1991). A criticism of the *Ready to Read Series* was that there is often a lot of memorization activities without understanding them. On the other hand, the strengths of the program were the daily writing the children produced and the motivation and enjoyment the reading books had for the pupils evident from classrooms (Moore & Lumelume, 1991). Therefore, there had been various reading programs that were implemented before in Fiji and various island countries that complemented existing reading activities and do have beneficial outcomes for pupils and schools. Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, and Fingeret (2007) emphasized the need to continually complement existing reading and writing programs at schools as schools with high reading and writing achievements are also schools that explicitly focus on these and ensure a demanding but positive instruction around these skills. Kim (2007) also reinforced that other innovations such as organizing voluntary summer reading activities for students can also help complement what is happening in the formal school term.

Subject Integration

This study found and realized the importance of incorporating other subjects and events that are relevant to the pupils' learning. This project utilized sports and sports champions to promote reading among school children. It also made use of events such as the fathers' day and the library week, which occurred during the project's duration to read books specifically relevant to those occasions. It was important that the authors and champion readers were able to integrate other learning opportunities into the reading program. Another example of integration was that since a champion reader mentioned to the children countries she went to compete in volleyball for Fiji, authors bought a world map for the class and helped them understand more about those countries. The volleyball champion competed internationally at Tonga, China, Thailand, Cambodia and Kazakhstan while the football and rugby champion mentioned Vanuatu and New Zealand so these provided learning opportunity for the children.

It was fathers' day over the weekend so authors ensured that the books read during the week were about fathers and a male athlete with a disability was the champion reader. While the program was implemented at the school, there was the library week so we made use of the library week to advocate for reading and reading books. The 2019 theme for the library week pasted on the wall of the head teacher's office was:



Figure 3: *Library week theme*

Reflecting on the Fiji library week, Boginiso (2019) stressed that it reminds Fiji children the importance of reading and to do so "as much as they could because the future mainly depends on how much they read" (p. 10). In addition, Lingam (2019) emphasized during the library week that libraries, books and reading are vital to building depth and knowledge in society. Lingam also added that related to reading is writing but to write one would need ideas and imagination from books and

reading materials. Thus, a love for reading is an integral habit that children and society need to have to build stronger communities that is literate.

Kreider (2018) supports the notion of integrating reading aloud to children and literacy activities to physical education as being literate is the foundation to education. Kreider tried something novel by having three schools in Washington to incorporate movement with whole-class read-aloud time. Often, during reading time children are asked to sit still but Kreider suggests this should not necessarily be so and implemented the *Read and Move Project*, aiming to encourage both literacy and movement. For example, in readings where there are action verbs, movement can be inserted such as hopping, ducking, going under and over, or do ten jumping stars when Suzie picked that many flowers in a book that was read to pupils (Kreider, 2018). Adrelchick (2015) stated that improving children's literacy levels should not be the job of English teachers and in English lessons alone. Adrelchick integrated reading and textual literacy into the art classroom (Adrelchick, 2015). In the Pacific Island country of Nauru, Serow, Sullivan, and Taylor (2017) found it to be effective to integrate literacy with science through teacher-made teaching and learning resources. Wiggins (2007) promoted literacy in the music classroom, a venue where children can be nurtured into necessary skills in both music and literacy. Patterson (2007), therefore, reinforced that teaching literacy should be across the curriculum in order that pupils understand that literacy skills are vital in all aspects of daily life. Schools need to find creative ways of promoting literacy in and out of school (Patterson, 2007). Therefore, as many innovative ideas need to be put into school literacy as it is essential for success in the other subjects. Every student has to develop increasingly complex reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

Learning Environment and Experience

Another finding of this study is that age-appropriate books that are visually appealing accompanied by suitable after-reading activities, a cozy and warm classroom, and appropriate class organization, all contributed to a conducive learning environment and positive experiences for pupils. These are factors this study found to enable maximal pupil engagement and that both pupil, readers and researchers were absorbed into the books themselves. Elley (1995), who was involved in the *Book Flood* program in Fiji in 1980 and 1981, highlighted how much it has impacted on the author as a researcher and to realize that by flooding schools with highly interesting reading books helped significantly on the language development of the children (Elley, 1995). In this study, the researchers were equally engaged in the books as were the pupils and sports champions. All who were involved in the program learned from the experience.

Dennis, Lynch, and Stockall (2012) emphasized the importance of children being immersed in a "literacy-rich environment" (p. 3) where there are multiple activities organized including stories read aloud, choosing appropriate books, preparing the classroom setting, and engaging school children during reading sessions. It is integral to show the importance of reading books by displaying them, use audio books, and have themes that children can decorate the classroom with, such as if it was on insects, have pupils decorate the room with insects (Dennis et al., 2012). Furthermore, teachers can ensure books are age-appropriate, have those that are culturally relevant and also reflect the diversity in the class. In addition, Dennis et al. (2012) also cautioned the need to see that children's books do not promote sexism and racism as there are children's books that do so blatantly or subtly. In the Fiji context, Nandan (1979) also cautioned that often popular European reading books and tales have poor connotations such as 'Ba Ba Black Sheep' which implies things black are evil. Reading books should bring in Fiji children a sense of place and belonging towards their own sea, mountains, rivers, environment and reverence for the country. They should also depict the history, culture and religions of the children which are rich sources of tales (Nandan, 1979).

Inspiration, Anticipation and Enjoyment

This study found that pupils enjoyed, had fun, were happy and encouraged, and constantly anticipated the reading program. Pupils were also inspired by the reading program, which increased their interest levels, motivation and consequently their perceived acquisition. In the Fiji context, Fesaitu (1983) in the 1980s also conducted a reading program to three different groups of children at Fiji schools who were mainstream, mute and blind and reflected on the enjoyment and anticipation of the reading sessions. The children in the reading program were from a lower socio-economic background and access to books could be limited, “the sessions we had were something they looked forward to” (Fesaitu, 1983, p. 18). The children were excited and interacted with Fesaitu when the books were read such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *The Kuia and the Spider* and asked many questions, commented and debated on things related to the book. The mute children were particularly observant and noticed features that Fesaitu did not notice. The children would mimic what they had learned from the readings and the blind children, even though they cannot see, reacted so positively to the stories and showed a lot of enthusiasm for the story books (Fesaitu, 1983).

In this study, by bringing in guest readers, it had stirred new excitement and enjoyment for the class three children. Clark and Rumbold (2006) reinforced the importance of the enjoyment of reading by stating that “if children do not enjoy reading when they are young, then they are unlikely to do so when they get older” (p. 17). Thus, instilling a positive attitude towards reading at a younger age is pertinent to lifelong love for reading and reading for pleasure. Merga and Saiyidi (2018) stressed that “enjoyment of reading books is related to reading proficiency, and fostering students’ enjoyment of reading is imperative to support continued reading engagement” (p. 213). Even the notion of anticipation is advocated by Acosta-Tello (2019) as salience during read aloud sessions to children to create anticipation. In this study, champion readers often inform the class what books will be next and a bit about who will be reading to them in the coming session. New books each session also provided that anticipation among school children.

Rapport and Relationship

This study recognizes that improved reading abilities occur if there are rapport and positive relationships among those involved such as the school management, readers, program coordinators, the school teacher, and pupils. These were displayed through reciprocal appreciations, an end of program party, empathy for each other, and being keen on readers, vice versa. Merga (2019) interviewed 30 school librarians in the US and compiled the importance of their work in terms of helping struggling readers, advice on age and skill-appropriate books, promote access to books, help in reading aloud to pupils, besides other roles. This study also used school librarians where it can in facilitating the reading aloud program in class three and in preparing the ensuing activities. Merga and Saiyidi (2018) also highlighted the important role parents have in fostering a positive attitude toward reading among children. School leaders as pedagogical leaders (Rapp, 2010) should have personal responsibility to have focus on leading learning and teaching including a literacy-enriched environment. Thus, parents, teachers, peers, and the school management all have a stake in the improvement of students’ reading abilities and where there are rapport and positive relationships, pupils are bound to thrive.

Improved Learning

This study found that it is the perception of pupils, the class teacher and readers that learning manifested through improved reading, writing, listening, and conversation skills that is inclusive and relevant for slow readers, context and reality, and in instilling a love for reading. Ricketts (1982) conducted a study of Suva schools in the 1980s asserted that “if English teachers could be persuaded to include regular story reading aloud in their English programmes, the level of attainment in English could be expected to rise substantially. This would be a quick, simple and inexpensive way of

improving English teaching in the Pacific” (p. 35). Reading aloud to children is simple and may often be seen as entertainment but it is not. It is both enjoyable and a form of instruction that can help in the teacher’s role in enabling language learning among its pupils (Ricketts, 1982). Moreover, Ricketts (1982) suggested that since reading books may not be abundant at many schools in Fiji, neighboring schools could exchange books between them to add variety and continually engage the imagination of its pupils.

Moore and Ricketts (1983) also implemented a reading programme at a Suva school in Fiji for a year and did a pre-and post-test on children’s reading abilities and found incremental gains that they would have not normally, except for a couple of pupils. Books should be an imperative part of children’s lives but “in the South Pacific region however, some children do not get the opportunity to enjoy many books and, even at school, formal language lessons are often considered to be more important than listening to stories or reading them” (Moore & Ricketts, 1983, p. 38). Those who had daily reading aloud sessions made more gains than those who went through a normal English classroom, which indicates that listening to stories and sharing books are highly beneficial in language learning and comprehension (Moore & Ricketts, 1983). There had been studies conducted in Suva on the importance of reading aloud to children but none had used sporting champions as readers in classrooms. This may be the first trial of this idea in the Pacific Islands but internationally there is a similar program called the *read like demons* implemented by Monash University of Australia (Fulco & Lee, 2010; Monash University, 2015) and Soccer’s premier league in England also has a community program known as the *Premier League Reading Stars* (Premier League, 2015) and both use elite players to read aloud for school children in order to stimulate improved literacy. The Monash University program uses professional Australian Football players and the English premier league uses professional soccer players to help deliver reading programs among school children.

Unlike other reading programs that have previously been implemented in Fiji and the Pacific Islands, this is unique and the first to incorporate elite athletes into the reading curricula in the context. Framed on the motivational theory of role modeling (Morgenroth et al., 2015) these elite athletes have been *role models as behavioral models, role models as representatives of the possible, and role models as inspirations*, which are the three functions of role models. They have provided encouragement that reading is fun and it is possible to enjoy reading for a lifetime as a desirable aim.

Conclusion

If pupils fall behind seriously in reading, that will have major repercussions in their progress in education generally, as they would need to be literate to navigate other subjects at school. It is foundational to their success in other areas of school and daily life. Reading aloud is a valuable tool to stimulate language development and as many innovative ideas need to be used to ensure children grow loving to read and this study had tried to success the use of sporting elites as role models to build a positive relationship between books, reading, and the pupils. Not all children in Fiji and of course the Pacific Islands would have an ample number of books that are readily available and if they have regular encounters with someone reading aloud to them. Thus, bringing in many reading books that eventually belongs to the school and with cordial collaboration and relationship with all involved, it helps children to associate reading with support, enjoyment, appreciation and constant anticipation. Children participated in a variety of activities after reading aloud, asked questions and were active learners, envisaged to help build a foundation for lifelong love for reading.

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Using peer assessments for research and higher order learning in the online learning platform: Reflections and evidence from the Pacific

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Abstract

Peer assessment is a versatile teaching and learning tool that has been effectively used at different levels of education and assessment tasks with demonstrably positive effects. This study examines the differences between performance of students who participated in a voluntary peer assessment exercise prior to submitting their assignment and students who did not participate and records the benefits and challenges identified by students who engaged in the exercise. Fifty-one students from two online undergraduate research methods courses (one first and one third year course) undertook an online peer assessment exercise for a written assignment and answered open-ended post-exercise reflection questions regarding their experience. For comparison, a matching sample of 51 students was drawn randomly from a class list of students who did not participate in the study. The assignment marks of students who participated in the peer assessment exercise were substantially higher than those students who did not participate ($p = 0.0005$, $d = 1.02$). In the post-exercise reflection, students indicated that the peer assessment activity was useful in learning how to do specific aspects of the assignment, learning how to assess using rubrics, and identifying their own misconceptions and errors about assignment criteria, expectations, and performance. We conclude that online peer assessments can be effectively used in online undergraduate courses to enhance research, academic writing, and self-assessment skills, as well as assessment literacy in a Pacific context.

Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and has greatly evolved from its traditional role of certifying students' performance. Assessments determine if the learning goals have been met and effective and meaningful feedback for assessments directs student learning, motivates students, gives students an opportunity to reflect on what needs improvement, and assists in planning student-specific revisions to enhance learning (Dochy, Segers & Sluijmans, 1999; O'donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). The shift in focus of education systems to the development of skills and practices such as learner autonomy, reflective practice, critical thinking, and problem-solving, requires reinventing forms of assessments that allow for the development and assessment of these skills and practices, and use of peer assessments is one evidence-based formidable option (Dochy et al. 1999; O'Donovan et al, 2004; Philippakos, 2017; Topping, 2009). Topping (2009) defines peer assessment as "an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners" (p. 21).

This versatile assessment tool has been effectively used at different levels of education including primary, secondary, and tertiary and with a variety of assessment tasks such as oral presentations, written assessments, test performance, and even behaviour, for example as in group contribution (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Topping, 2009). Peer assessments can be organised in a number of ways such as reciprocal or group-based peer assessments; can be conducted face-to-face, on paper, and online; and serve cognitive and metacognitive objectives, giving participating students a chance to not only learn important skills (e.g. writing style, fairness, accuracy, responsibility etc.) but also to reflect on their learning (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011; Topping, 2009).

Use of peer assessment to enhance student achievement has a strong theoretical grounding. The foremost of these relate to building learner autonomy whereby students are willing to and/or able to take charge or responsibility of their own learning (Benson, 2006, as cited in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Nilsen, 2019). In relation to teaching and learning, learner autonomy not only develops skills such as self-regulation of learning and critical analysis, which greatly enhance classroom performance, but it is also expected that these skills translate into lifelong skills, equipping students for active engagement in democratic societies (Ahmadianzadeh, Seifoori, & Tamjid, 2020; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Dam and Legenhausen (2011) argue that evaluative practices, such as those used in peer assessments, form the “very pivot of learner autonomy” (p. 178).

There is substantial evidence indicating the benefits of peer assessments. Peer assessments improve students’ quality of performance in assessments through increasing student ownership, confidence, and self-reflections on the task (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Dochy et al., 1999; Han & Chan, 2020; O'donovan et al, 2004). Moreover, in the context of peer editing, peer assessments have been either equally, and in some cases, more effective in the improvement of student writing in comparison to marker feedback (Topping, 2009).

Peer assessments also improve quality of student outputs (Atkins, 2012; Cho and MacArthur, 2011; Zheng, Cui, Li, and Huang, 2018). Cho and MacArthur (2011) randomly assigned 61 undergraduate students to three conditions; 1) in the reviewing condition, students were required to assess three sample papers by giving written comments and rating the quality of the assignment using a rubric; 2) in the reading condition, students were required to carefully read sample papers until the experiment was completed; and 3) in the no treatment control condition, students were not asked to read or to review anything related to the experiment. The groups were matched for gender, writing skills, and content knowledge. The authors found significant differences in the quality of the writing, with students in the reviewing condition out-performing students from the other two conditions in their written assignments.

Students also describe multiple benefits of peer assessments. According to students participating in peer assessment exercises, providing feedback to peers engaged them in critical thinking, allowed them to adopt the marker’s perspective, and therefore assisted in gaining a better understanding of the requirements of the assignment (Han & Chan, 2020; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). Consequently, students report making modifications to their own writing after engaging in peer assessments, indicating that while engaging in peer assessments students are not only constantly comparing the piece assessed with their own work, but are also able to transfer the ideas generated through the peer assessment process to inform their own work, creating novel ideas in the process (Demir, 2018; Han & Chan, 2020; Nicol, et al., 2014, p. 111).

Including an evaluative component to peer assessments fosters self-reflection which allows students to critically evaluate what they are doing. This move from self-reflection to evaluation requires students to form an opinion and identify the reasons behind this opinion, thus allowing for greater cognitive control of the learning process which in turn encourages transfer of these skills to other similar assessments or situations (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Therefore, to ensure transferability of knowledge and skills that students develop through the peer assessment activity, students need to be given a chance to reflect on how they will apply the knowledge and skills gained to future assessments. This can be done purposefully by the instructor by including reflective exercises within the peer assessment activity. For example, Zheng et al. (2018) randomly assigned students undertaking a peer assessment activity into two groups. In the experimental group, the peer assessment activity was followed by 70 minute online synchronous discussion between the assessors and assessees, giving students an opportunity to reflect on and further evaluate the feedback given during the peer assessment exercise before revising their essay. The control group did not have a discussion following the peer assessment activity. Results revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group indicating that the synchronous discussion had a

significant impact on improving writing performance for the students and especially improved content writing skills (Zheng et al., 2018).

There has also been a shift in higher education in regards to marking transparency and accountability and there is a general requirement that marking criteria are made known to all stakeholders, especially students (O'Donovan et al., 2004). While it has become common practice among educators to provide sample student assessments and assessment rubrics, the literature on assessment literacy suggests that only when students are asked to work with the sample by using the rubric, as well as discussing the process, will students be able to utilize the sample and assessment rubrics effectively for their own learning and work (Dochy et al., 1999; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Topping, 2009; Zheng et al., 2018). Peer assessments using samples of student assessments and assessment rubrics can be very useful in helping students deconstruct assessment rubrics and gain better understanding of the marker's requirements (Jones, Allen, Dunn, & Brooker, 2017). It also allows students to take note of the varying levels of performance detailed in the rubric and identify the fine nuances in the differences between one descriptor and the next, which may otherwise be overlooked.

As the literature on assessment literacy and peer assessment is growing in the context of higher education in North America, Asia and Western Europe, it is still missing in the context of Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Changing education and employment contexts in the PICs (Raturi, Hogan, & Thaman 2011; Raturi, 2014) and globally (Biggs & Tang, 2011) demand that students develop skills and practices such as learner autonomy, self-reflection, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Peer assessments can be effective in facilitating the development of these skills. The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a regional university jointly owned by 12 PICs. It has 14 campuses and 9 centers spread throughout a region that spreads across 33 million square kilometres of ocean (The University of the South Pacific [USP], 2018). While USP has many courses that are taught online, in response to the coronavirus pandemic and strict border control and movement regulations in all its member countries, USP has moved all of its teaching to online mode. This move requires students to become autonomous learners, taking greater charge or responsibility of their own learning and therefore course instructors at USP are faced with the responsibility of developing these skills, in addition to existing programme and course learning outcomes, through existing course assessments. Hogan (2009) has documented that at USP, student experiences and outcomes are more negative among online learners than face-to-face learners, influenced by cultural, pedagogical and students' computer and digital literacy skills. Furthermore, the literature does not clearly indicate how students coming from contexts in which both online learning and peer-assessment (and self-assessment) activities are new, experience assessment literacy activities in their new contexts. It is also important to keep in mind that disparities in access to and quality of internet connectivity in the Pacific (Hogan, 2009; Raturi, Hogan, & Thaman, 2011; Raturi, 2014) can impact on how these types of activities are experienced and their learning outcomes.

Keeping these questions in mind, this study 1) explores the advantages and challenges of using peer assessment exercises in an online learning environment for students in the first-year and third-year undergraduate research method courses at USP; 2) examines whether students who participated in the peer assessment exercise score better in the assignment task than those students who did not participate; and 3) identifies to what extent student year, as a proxy for student experience with computer and other learning skills, and the online learning experience influences student perceptions of the benefits and challenges of peer-assessment activities. We expect that this study will document how opportunities to evaluate the work of peers prior to submitting assessments can be an effective learning tool among students from the Pacific and how such opportunities can be created in an online environment.

Method

Participants

Students were enrolled in two online undergraduate research methods courses; Ethics and Research Methods in the Social Sciences I (PS103) and Research Methods in Sociology (SO300) and were invited to participate in the study through notifications sent out through the online learning management system (Moodle) at USP. Participants' informed consent was obtained prior to participation and all students were assured of their rights to participation and withdrawal. The study was given ethical clearance by USP Research and International Office.

Both courses have a higher composition of female students (76% in PS103 and 68% in SO300) and this was also reflected in the sample. Fifty-one students (39 from PS103 and 12 from SO300) undertook the peer assessment exercise and attempted the open-ended reflection questions. For comparison of assignment marks, a sample of 51 students (39 from PS103 and 12 from SO300) were drawn randomly from a class list of students who did not participate in the study. The final sample had 75% females and 25% males and mainly consisted of students from Fiji (83%).

Materials

For each course an anonymised assignment from a previous offering and the rubric for the assessment task were used for peer assessment. The assignment chosen for the peer assessment activity and the assignment students had to submit for this offering of the course, assessed the same learning outcomes and were the same type of assessment (literature review for PS103 and research proposal for SO300) and therefore had similar formatting and stylistic requirements. However, the assignment question for this semester was different, for example, the literature review for PS103 students was based on a different set of research questions this semester. The analytic rubrics for the two courses identified the different sections and sub-sections of the assignment that was being assessed in the leftmost row followed by five levels of performance descriptors (in descending order, with the lowest being "no evidence") across each row.

As part of the peer-review exercise and to facilitate students to reflect on their own learning process, students were asked to respond to the following questions: What did you learn about the assessment by using the rubric to assess the sample paper? What are 3-5 key things you are going to use from this activity to help you do your own assignment? How did the feedback on this activity from the course coordinator help you understand the assessment criteria? What are 3-5 key things that you used from the peer assessment activity to help you with your assignment? What are 1-2 key things you are going to use from this peer-review activity to help you do future assessments (in this course or any other course)? While some may consider these to be 'leading' questions, we found it important to ensure that these questions would act as an opportunity for students to reflect on the activity and their learning, as is common in practices related to supporting the development of metacognition.

Procedure

Upon giving informed consent to participating in the study, students were given access to an assignment and an online grading platform for the assignment using the same analytic rubric that will be used to grade their assignments later in the semester. Students graded each section of the assessment by selecting the descriptor that they found most applicable to that section of the paper. After students submitted their grading for the assignment, they were given access to the grading given by the marker for the course, alongside detailed description for the grading for each section. Students were then given a series of open-ended questions to answer in relation to their experience of the peer assessment activity. Students had to then answer another set of open-ended questions after submitting their assignments through an online assignment drop-box. The time interval between the peer assessment activity and assignment deadline was approximately two weeks. Once the assignment was graded, the marks for all students were downloaded and grouped into two categories;

those who participated in the peer assessment activity and those who did not. To protect students' identity only their initials have been used in this paper.

Results

Comparing Assessment Marks

The assignment marks of students who participated in the peer assessment exercise ($M= 72.5$, $SD= 17.8$) prior to submitting their assignments were substantially higher than those students who did not participate ($M=52$, $SD= 22.4$). Students who participated in the exercise scored approximately 20.46 marks higher, 95% CI [12.51, 28.41] than students who did not participate. These differences were statistically significant with a large sized effect $t(100) = 51.05$, $p < 0.0005$, one tailed, $d = 1.02$.

Participant reflections on learning from the peer review activity

Student responses seem to indicate that the activity was useful in 1) learning how to do specific aspects of the assignment to gain research skills (e.g., importance of providing supporting evidence, choosing relevant articles, citations, etc.); 2) learning how to assess using rubrics; and 3) identifying their own misconceptions and errors about assignment criteria and expectations and performance.

One PS103 student, AR summarized the range of themes quite well. I learned:

1. the importance of instructions given by the Coordinator
2. the value of marks if carelessly written
3. the importance of reading the assignment questions
4. the importance of sentence structure and grammar
5. The need to pay attention and relate to other relevant documents as a guide for assignments
6. the importance of reading, being literate and attentive to the findings and current affairs
7. the importance of SLS in supporting the needs of students
8. I learned the importance of time
9. I learned to appreciate lecturers, technical staff, and teaching assistance meeting my needs academically
10. I learned the importance of mental behavior while pursuing a degree
11. I learned APA style and proper referencing
12. I learned to push myself to learn effectively and consistently
13. I learned the importance of research and the need to pay attention to it.

Assessment for learning.

Students indicated in different ways how the peer review activity allowed them to gain a better understanding of the assignment and specifics related to the research skills that these assignments were about. For example, some of the students in the PS103 course wrote regarding the literature review assignment,

I learnt how to correctly make the cover page by following the sample paper, how to write the introduction and its elements, how to start each review and how to in-text reference it, how to conclude the review, how to correctly reference each source, indent it and how to write the abstract after reading the literature review. [YC]

I learn how to write my own literature review assignment because at first I have no idea about it but when I saw the sample paper it helps me with it. [MT]

What I learned from the literature review assessment by using the rubric to assess the sample paper is to be able to identify various mistakes like always state the aim of the literature review when writing the abstract. And that when writing a literature review, there is a need to avoid over use or phrase taken from an article but rather have to paraphrase it to avoid act of plagiarism because we a reviewing someone else's work. Thus helps me to be able to put into practice when writing my literature review. [SF]

First of all, the feedback helped me to start my literature review, it opened the door of understanding on what I was supposed to do according to the marking rubric and my checklist. [MN]

Similarly, the SO300 students indicated the activity was useful in learning how to do research design and write a research proposal:

Going through this activity, one thing that came clear to me, is to make sure we understand what we are doing, we are clear why we are doing the research, because if we do then we should be able to relate our research question to the existing literature, identify what is left to be answered, how our research will answer those questions? what methodology will be taken given our situation? And many features of a research that need to be considered. [LF]

What I learnt from the literature review assessment is that it is very important to choose your relevant and scholarly articles carefully because the ones that portrayed a great depth of information and provide supporting evidence to your research question are the ones that should be used. In addition, the literature review very much gives a clear idea on why the research question will be answered and its relevance and how does it fill the gap in providing information that other researchers did not cover. [MT_2]

Developing evaluation of learning skills.

Student responses clearly indicated that the activity was not only helping them learn *specific* assignment skills, but that they were also gaining skills related to criteria-based evaluation, including using rubrics to assess others' work, self-assessment and taking on the 'marker's' perspective. Moreover, students clearly indicated that they were gaining skills on how rubrics can be used for learning, planning and completing their assignments. For example, students in PS103 shared:

I used the marking rubric to analyze my assignment. [OV]

The first key thing I learnt was how the marking rubric can be a great help when writing an essay. [TW]

It helped me understand the requirements of this assessment better. Marking the sample paper also allowed me to view the work through the marker's eyes and this, in turn, helped me to better understand how I can improve my own paper. [JK]

When reviewing the literature review with the rubric, I got to see writing from a different perspective and it showed how simply following the rubric and cross checking with it could prevent simple errors. [TW]

The things that I learnt from these peer review activities which really assisted me during my assignment was proper citation methods, paraphrasing and direct quotes, how to do proper referencing, and what to include in each section of the assignment according to the marking criteria. [AS]

Making criteria from the peer review activity which help me to structure my assignment well. [MT]

When I finished my assignment, I cannot find the wrong place. But when I finished reading the sample, I saw the wrong place which he has, then I realise which part of my assignment is wrong. [XM]

What I learnt from the literature review assessment by using the rubric, is that it helps me also to identify what wrongs or errors in my literature review assessment, that I can improve on. [MT_1]

This was a great learning experience for me. I had to first read through the whole literature review sample twice so that I can really capture what the literature was about. When assessing it, I felt that I was using reflective thinking and at the same time critical thinking, trying to analyse each paragraph by matching each again their particular marking rubric. And when matching each paragraph against marking rubric, I had to stop and ask myself this question - "Which one should I choose and why? It also influences and motivates me to re-check my assignment 1 again. So I had to go back and review my assignment 1 and make more corrections. Thank you very for allowing us students to undergo these activities. [OV]

It helps me pretty much in the way that it showed me whether or not I did the right thing or if I'm even in the right path. [LL]

While all of these types of responses were common in both courses *thematically*, students in the 100-level seem to engage more directly with the use of the rubric as a site of learning, while students in the 300-level seem to engage more with the value of seeing the feedback of the marker to the sample work in where they perceived these learning happening. For example, students in SO300 shared:

Very, very helpful, now I get to clearly see how the marker see my work, and what she looks for in my proposal. [LF]

The feedback helped me to analyse the activity in a closer detail. It showed me things in the activity that I did not notice. I think I have a better idea of the assessment and the criteria which will greatly help me when I'm working on my contribution to the group research. [MT_1]

The feedback on this activity from the course coordinator shed some light on some of the mistakes that I overlooked from the sample research proposal paper. It helps me not to repeat the same mistakes in the upcoming research proposal and it helps me also to take note of the important criteria and requirements that should be met to have an effective and good research proposal paper that is coherently written with all the sources and information correctly cited and described. [MT_2]

The feedback from the coordinator helped me understand some of the criteria that I was not really sure what it was referring to. [MT_3]

Students also noted that the activity had a positive motivational effect, giving students the confidence to be able to do the assessment. For example, one student in PS103 student shared:

By using my reflective and critical thinking in order to argue which is correct and why? I really appreciate experiencing these activities. Now it makes me want to focus on my assignment 1 and make it more better, so that I can get full mark. After undergoing this activity, I feel that I am now confident to do my assignment and that I can make it to score the full mark allocated for the assignment 1. [OV]

Another SO300 student noted:

It definitely assisted me with areas I was not confident in understanding such as that of the literature review and the methodology section. [KP]

Learning for marks?

While most student participant reflections indicated an engagement with deeper learning processes, some student responses do suggest that the activity may have also led to a focus on marks and rubric criteria at the expense of learning more broadly. For example, in PS103 students' responses included:

I learnt that I can lose crucial marks without using the rubric. The rubric states that the font to be used is New Times Roman with font size 12. From the sample paper, the references section did not follow this so 1 mark was lost. [LM]

It was a new experience and it gives light to how our assignments are marked. Most of the time, I just read the marking rubric but now I know what all the parts mean and how important it is to fulfil all the marking points in order to get good grades. [AS]

The one key thing that I will always use now after this activity, is to always refer back to the rubric. It really is the perfect tool to help me achieve the best possible mark. [TW]

And in SO300, responses included this:

Keep going back to the marking rubric, since I will be aiming to get the highest mark, I will see what are the requirements to get that mark. [MT_1]

In brief then, while some students seem to focus on marks rather than learning, what we find that student participants in this activity in both these online research methods courses were able to use a detailed rubric to assess sample student work on a type of assessment that is new to them (a literature review/research proposal), conduct this activity in an online forum, critically compare their own assessment of the student sample work with that of the marker, and then utilize this process to enhance their own understanding of how to do the literature review and how to use a rubric both for learning, as well as for self-assessment.

Discussion

The shift in the last few decades to online and blended modes of learning in higher education has created a need to examine how effective learning strategies in 'traditional' face-to-face learning environments can be translated and adapted (Gikandi et al., 2011). In particular, while existing research on student learning underscores the value of peer and self-assessment activities as a major way to achieve assessment literacy, research in this area is lacking on three aspects: 1) how can peer/self-assessment activities be translated to the online environment (Broadbent & Poon, 2015) how do students coming from cultural and educational backgrounds where both online learning and peer/self-assessment activities are new to engaging with such activities; and 3) to what extent can the same type of peer/self-assessment activities be used at different student levels?

Our results show that irrespective of level of study, student performance is enhanced by participation in these activities and that student engagement with, reflection on, and awareness of the benefits of these activities for their own learning is enhanced. When we take into account that students enrolling in USP usually come in from schools in the PICs where learning is pre-dominantly face-to-face and utilizes approaches that do not usually support skills related to peer-learning and self-assessment, the success of this activity for these outcomes in the PS103 course is especially promising in supporting development of assessment literacy skills in the online learning environment and as such facilitating the development of independent learning by students. Often academic staff are concerned about the use of peer assessment because they worry about students' ability to assess using external

criteria and limit bias (Azarnoosh, 2013; Matsuno, 2009; Cho, Schunn, & Wilson, 2006). The kind of peer assessment activity described here shows that students are able to both assess other students' work using a rubric, as well as learn to self-assess and improve their own work using the peer assessment process. Moreover, this kind of activity, in which students are utilizing skills of peer assessment for learning (and not grading a peer), should also allay the concerns staff may have about student ability.

Interestingly, students at the higher level seem to suggest they benefitted more from the marker feedback aspect of the activity, compared to 100-level students focusing on the use of the rubric itself as a site of learning. The difference in focus from the PS103 vs. SO300 students in terms of where they felt they were learning the most from in the activity may be related to a range of issues, including differences in student experience with using rubrics, the quality of feedback from the marker in each course, and differences in quality of rubrics between the two courses. While our current study does not allow us to assess which of these factors may be at play, we would suggest that starting these type of activities from 100-level courses can be beneficial for students at higher levels being able to use self-directed learning strategies that include using rubrics, samples and self-assessment for assignment completion and learning, which has been also proposed in previous studies (Thomas, Martin, & Pleasants, 2011; Liu & Carless, 2006).

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Online learners' experiences and views towards online courses: A case study of the University of the South Pacific

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Abstract

In higher education, demand for online courses has risen over the years, and higher education institutes (HEIs) are investing heavily in the development and delivery of online courses. As a regional university, the University of the South Pacific (USP) is no exception and has made an incremental shift from face-to-face and print methods to blended and fully online methods in course delivery. At USP, significant attention has been given to developing an online learning environment using the Moodle platform, upskilling academics and supporting employees to offer good experience to the learners regardless of their location. An area that needs research, however, is the study experiences of online learners. Are they getting what they expected from online learning? Are online courses intended to satisfy the styles and preferences of their learning? This study tries to answer these two questions by collecting online learners' opinions and experiences at USP. Data were collected from 75 learners registered in 3 online courses using a questionnaire. Positive student experiences of online learning included greater flexibility, timely feedback and greater opportunities for interaction with academic and peers. Challenges identified included poor internet connectivity and lack of familiarity with the online learning management system and tools for first time online learners. Students highly rated the use of multimedia, online learning materials and online assessments as positive contributors to their learning in online courses. Most of the learners were satisfied with online course design and delivery and reported positive learning experience for the three online courses at USP. However, 20 percent of the learners were not satisfied with their online learning experience. Some aspects such as course navigation and feedback system could be improved and training of first time online learners could further improve student learning experience.

Introduction

The University of the South Pacific University (USP) is a regional university with 12-member countries (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu). USP serves as the leading provider of tertiary education in the sparsely populated South Pacific region, covering an area of over 33 million square kilometres. Within the past decade alone, there has been an increase in student interest for online courses at USP, thereby encouraging gradual shift from the traditional course delivery to online methods. USP began developing blended and online courses since the implementation of the Moodle, Learning Management System (LMS) in 2006. The blended delivery method utilises a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching, while the online mode is predominantly based on online teaching techniques and less than 20 percent face-to-face teaching or interaction. Most of the classes provided at USP are currently either face-to-face or blended modes of delivery (USP Handbook and Calendar, 2019). However, a number of online courses are being developed or converted from the other modes to online in line with the USP strategic plan 2019-2021.

Students' successful completion of online courses to a large extent depends on acceptable and satisfactory course design. Experts have found that within many online courses, learners'

dissatisfaction exists for several reasons such as methods of communication, getting the one on one assistance, and understanding the content, which are all necessary for learning success (Bawa, 2016; Gilbert, 2015; Nguyen, 2015; Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

The change from face-to-face to the online mode of delivery is a worldwide trend, and many universities around the globe are now offering online courses (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Most institutions of higher education are involved in some type of online learning that provides greater flexibility, is less costly and enables technological innovation to be used. However, there exists a paucity of research on understanding the expectations and experiences of students studying online courses especially in the South Pacific region.

Online students expect the means for navigating around an online class to be easy and self-explanatory (Kebritchi et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2015). The design of such an environment is important to ensure ease of use (Bryant & Bates, 2015). Such factors necessary for online education include the ease with access, clear directions for navigation, simple and easy delivery modes, and communication methods which require little effort (Ching & Hsu, 2015; Sun & Chen, 2016). Others, however, feel that a few strategies in the development of an online environment would be more productive. These include involving the learners in collaborative work, enlisting and providing a clear and consistent structure, and always keeping an open mind as students become acclimatized to the online environment (Arias et al., 2018).

Other experts believe it is highly advantageous to have mandatory learning sessions for every first time online student (Chawinga, 2017; Darling-Hammond et.al., 2019; Schindler, et al., 2017). Many schools have added a course in the freshman roster that introduces and teaches the use and navigation of online classes (Muldrow, 2014). Other schools have opted to not allow freshman to take online classes, citing they may not have the necessary time management skills required for such a course (Huss & Eastep, 2015). Even so, learning the specific features of a University or College's online environment is necessary for all students no matter what their age or year of school. From visiting the library for research to purchasing books for classes, to receiving grades, and even uploading papers through a plagiarism checking software are similarly required for all students.

Limited student perspective from online learners in the present knowledge leaves a significant gap and restricts the interpretation of the factors or characteristics that can create a good and useful learning experience for online students. Allen and Seaman (2017) found that of all students taking one online class, practically half are taking just online classes and while the vast majority of these online courses and projects are offered by several schools. Several factors need to be considered when accommodating the varying needs of online learners such as learning styles and the socio-economics of the online learner, moral issues intrinsic in online guidance; and systems for online guidance through the investigation of viable online systems (Oliver & Herrington, 2001). There has been relatively greater emphasis on preparing and providing support to academic staff and course designers to transition to online learning modes. However, the learners, on the other hand, have been expected to transition from the traditional way of learning to online learning with minimum support.

The objectives of this study were to get the views and experiences of learners studying online at USP and to stimulate reflections on course design features that are learner focused and enhances online learning experiences.

Methodology

An online survey was employed for data collection for this study using Survey Monkey paid

subscription. Survey monkey was chosen because of its analytics and anonymity of survey participants to meet the data collection ethics requirement at USP. The online survey link was shared on the Moodle course page for three generic online courses taken by all USP students.

The online survey aimed to measure the learners' experiences and views towards the design features used in the three courses they were enrolled in. The design features comprised of Course Navigation, Visual Design/Stimuli, Multimedia, eLearning Assessments, Feedback system, Supplementary links to online resources, Technology and Moodle tools for interaction. The online survey was conducted in the second half of the semester over 4 weeks and administered once for the purpose of this research

The online survey questions were adopted from the Australasian Council on Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ACODE) Threshold Standards 2017. These threshold standards serve as a guide for online learning environments and is relevant to courses with an online component associated to them or as prescribed by the institutional policies. This checklist assists in maintaining consistency and quality of online course development and design.

A Likert scale was used to measure participants' opinions using the online questionnaire. Likert scales are useful when you are measuring latent constructs - that is, characteristics of people such as attitudes, feelings, opinions, etc. This method was chosen as the questions were specific to the research topic and where required follow-up open-ended questions were used to collect detailed participants' opinions.

Online Survey Questionnaire

The online survey questionnaire comprised of 18 questions (16 closed questions out of which 4 questions had follow-up open-ended questions; and two open-ended questions). The questions ranged from demographic questions to specific online design elements in the courses.

The survey questions were not of a sensitive nature and were aimed to find out students' experience studying in an online environment and what design features helped in their learning.

The first set of questions focused on consents and demographics; courses the participants enrolled in, gender, studying on or off-campus, and if they had taken a prior online course. The second set of survey questions were multipart, with questions asking to rate their beliefs on the design of the course such as the course outline, the resources available during the class, the usability perspective, and having the course content clearly indicated. These survey questions required rating from strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Sample

Students enrolled in three online courses were invited to participate in the online survey. The courses are pseudo named as courses A, B, and C to maintain confidentiality. Course A and B are 100 level while course C is 200 level course. The students were provided with the participant information and details of the research and for their consent to participate in the study. Students were also given the option to opt-out at any stage of the survey. In an attempt to gather as much data as possible, students were given a prize incentive to encourage participation in the online survey. To maintain student anonymity, a separate link was given to enter the draw to win prizes once the survey had been completed. A total of 75 students voluntarily opted to participate in the survey.

The survey data obtained from survey monkey was downloaded and basic statistical analysis such as mean values and frequencies of the responses were calculated to represent the views of the

participants. A word cloud was generated using Survey Monkey to determine student views on online learning. Thematic analysis was used to categorize data from the surveys into themes and are represented in the form of figures and tables in the results section. ANOVA was carried out to determine differences in student opinions between the courses. The results were analysed collectively for all three courses and from the 14 different campuses to understand the views regarding online learning. The differences in student views between campuses were beyond the scope of the current study.

Results

Learner’s background

A total of 75 Students from 14 different campuses participated in the survey on student experiences. The respondents were enrolled in courses A (64%), B (22%), C (8%) and a small percentage (6%) of the respondents were simultaneously enrolled in other online courses at USP. The respondents included 55% females, 39% males and 7% did not disclose their gender. Most of the participants (59%) were taking their first online course at USP.

Students’ views on the online learning experience and expectations

Positive online student experience included greater interest as it is a new way of learning; improved the learners' knowledge on how to research and collect information from different sources for assignments; and also helped with development of ICT skills (Figure 1). It also offered greater flexibility, course materials and information including assignments and due dates were made available at the beginning of the semester. Students also benefitted from regular and timely feedback on assignments and discussions with the course coordinators and fellow students through peer interactions online. In the follow-up question to the students who indicated that they had prior experience in online learning, students shared that studying online helped them to become independent learners and manage their time effectively.



Figure 1: Word cloud of responses on student expectations from the online course

The majority of off-campus students indicated that they encountered difficulty following the notes and completing activities due to poor network connectivity, which made it difficult to access course materials and complete activities on time. Both on-campus and off-campus students found it difficult to submit assignments online as this is something they were not familiar with.

Some of the comments from students when asked what could be improved in the design of their courses for future offer were as follows:

“Include more eMentoring sessions”

“Find some other application to deliver eMentoring session”

“Upgrade the computers in the Labs and improve internet connection”

“Make the video tutorials livelier”

Overall, students indicated that studying online courses at USP was relatively more difficult than studying a face-to-face course.

There was no significant difference (0.249) in the students' beliefs between the courses and within the course (Table 1).

Table 1: Perceptions relayed by the participants in the survey

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 1711.058 | 3 | 570.353 | 1.451 | .249 |
| Within Groups | 11007.817 | 28 | 393.136 | | |
| Total | 12718.875 | 31 | | | |

Tools for online interaction

Forums allowed easy interaction with instructors and peers providing a virtual space to ask questions and share knowledge related to the course. The lesson tool gave flexibility to students, allowing them to refer to and revisit information on activities. It also helped with understanding concepts before moving onto the next topic. The chat function provided synchronous feedback when used during agreed online consultation hours and was quicker. The most popular learning tools in Moodle (Figure 2) in descending order were forum (75%), lesson (71.8%), database (43.8%), chat (40.6%), workshop (37.5%), and quickmail (34.4%). A small percentage (3%) of the students selected “Other tools” which included receiving course information and updates in the student email accounts. These were sent directly by the unit coordinators from their staff email accounts to the student email accounts. One participant commented:

“I felt connected to the course when my Unit coordinator sent emails about important updates or additional support to my student email account. I felt that I was given extra attention since I was not very chatty and an average student in the online environment like other students”

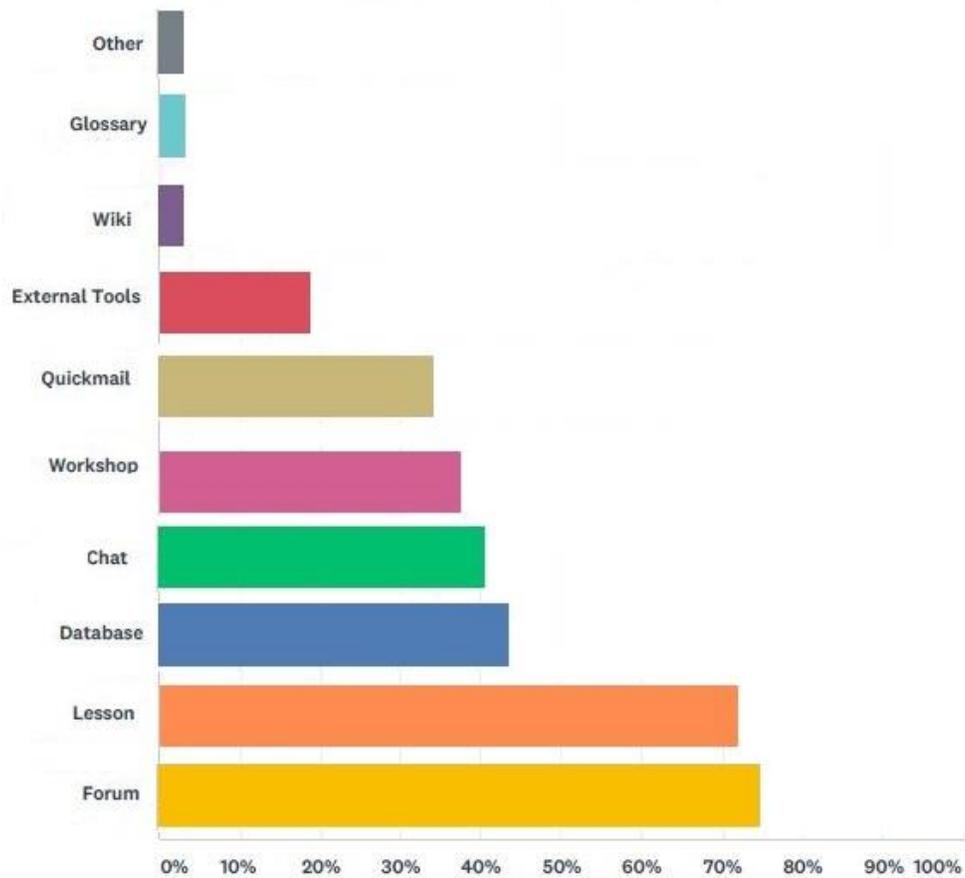


Figure 2: Popular Moodle online tools for interaction

Tools for Assessment and Assessment Feedback

The most popular Assessment tools in Moodle (Figure 3) in descending order were Quiz (58%), Assignment (52%), Lesson (30%), Marksheet (21%), Forum (18%) and Workshop (6%). It was also noted that 3% of the participants selected “Other tools” for assessment which was peer support provided while reading the discussions. One of the participants stated:

“While I did not interact much in discussions or unassessed activities, I learned a lot from my peers by just reading their postings and most of my questions regarding the assignments were clarified that way”

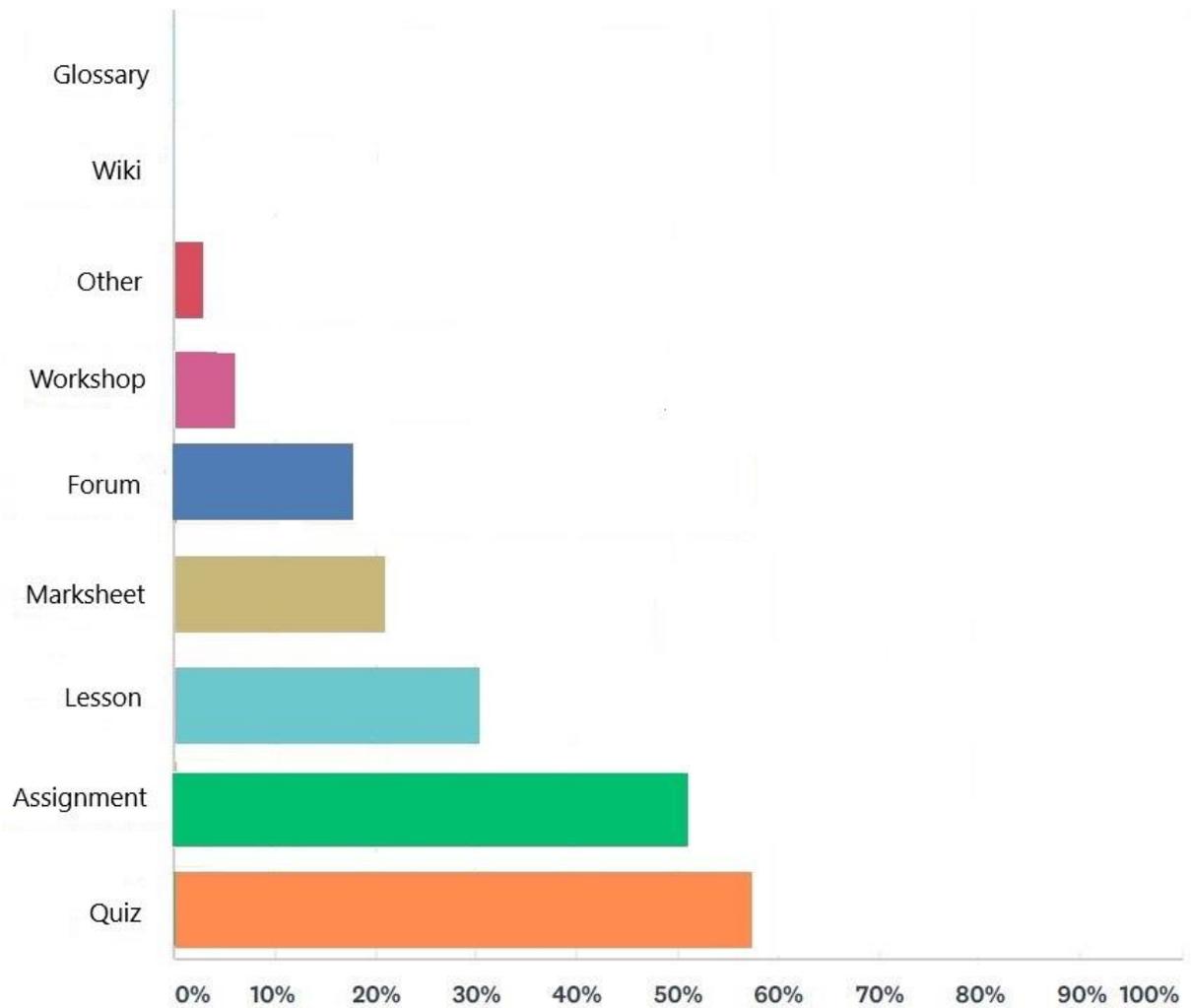


Figure 3: Popular Moodle Assessment Tools

The majority (81%) of students indicated that they were satisfied with the overall course design features in their courses while a relatively small percentage (8%) were not satisfied with the course design. The course materials being readily available (24/7) and the variety of resources were most useful to the students. As shown in Table 2, (88%) were satisfied with how the course outline was presented and made accessible. 79% of the students found it easy to navigate through the course while 83% of the students found the multimedia part of their course materials as useful to their learning. In addition, students were able to use the multimedia resources and the formats available were user friendly.

While 89% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that the use Visual design/Stimuli was used in their courses to capture their interest, the Technology on the other hand, had 61% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that it was readily available or the purpose of using external technology was clearly explained. 88% of the students were satisfied with the various e-

learning Assessments in their courses. However, a relatively smaller number of students (65%) were satisfied with the timeframe within which assessment feedback was provided to them.

Table 2: Summary of students' views on online course design features (N=75)

| | Strongly Agree (SA) | Agree (A) | Neither agree nor disagree (N) | Disagree (D) | Strongly Disagree (SD) | No response |
|--|----------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Course Outline | 47% | 41% | 11% | 2% | - | - |
| 2. Navigation | 37% | 42% | 12% | 3% | - | - |
| 3. Visual Design/Stimuli | 52% | 37% | 4% | 6% | - | 2% |
| 4. Relevant Multimedia | 49% | 34% | 16% | - | - | - |
| 5. E-learning Assessments | 39% | 49% | 4% | 5% | - | 1% |
| 6. Feedback System | 38% | 29% | 21% | 8% | 3% | 1% |
| 7. Supplementary links to online resources | 45% | 46% | 4% | 5% | - | - |
| 8. Technology | 19% | 42% | 15% | 6% | - | 18% |
| Total mean | 41% | 40% | 11% | 5% | 3% | 6% |

Discussion

The expectations of higher education students are shifting from the traditional way of learning to a complex way of learning due to the growing demand for online learning. Students who wish to be successful in an online environment often consider the appropriate communication tools used in the course and ease of navigation to be a necessary learning need (Graetz, 2006; Smart & Cappel, 2006).

The majority of learners (81%) were satisfied with the design and delivery of the online courses at USP. The use of online learning environments is increasing gradually and multimedia tools enrich the delivery of course contents. According to Mayer and Moreno (2002), multimedia instructional messages involving words (such as spoken or written text) and pictures (such as animation, video, illustrations, photographs) promote quality learning and helps cater for diverse learning styles among students. This is important considering the

diverse nature of students at USP coming from different cultural, socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. Students enrolled in online courses are not concerned with the design of the learning management system; all they want is to have access to all the learning resources and learning experience they want (Raskin, 2000).

It has been found that the integration of visual elements into audio in dialogues and lessons typically increases student performance (Hamdan & Al-Hawamdeh, 2018; Lee & Mayer, 2015; Safarali & Hamidi, 2012). Using audio and videos to support their learning was particularly useful to 75-93% of the students. Visual advantages of video provide a platform for and access to practical presentations, enabling students to learn from field experts by being provided with the opportunity to watch close-up expert examples and to display them regularly if appropriate (Cooper & Higgins, 2015; Ramlogan et al., 2014).

Visual design and stimuli aspects (illustrations, photography, typography, space, layouts, and aesthetic appeal) of the online courses were highly rated. Students agreed that font size was appropriate, relevant and visually appealing. However, 6-10% of the students suggested that images and multimedia files could be improved.

Most of the respondents were satisfied with the design of the course, despite taking online courses for the first time. However, it is important to note that approximately 20% of the respondents stayed neutral. Those who engage in teaching and learning notice the variability in the pace and manner in which they obtain fresh data and thoughts from their learners. A major advantage of online learning is that materials are available to students and gives greater flexibility to engage with the learning materials at a suitable pace. For example, students can view videos to their preference such as pause and reflect on content which helps with their learning. Literature also suggests that scheduling training to adapt to individual learning should produce enhanced learner results (Coffield et al., 2004).

Online learners are looking for a learning experience that suits their learning styles. Some of these aspects are ease of navigation, appropriate use of multimedia, visual design, eLearning assessments, supplementary resources, technology, and online tools utilised for interaction to accommodate the learning styles of the online learners. Literature from the past 50 years reflects that there is an ongoing debate surrounding the efficacy of learning styles and the impact on learning outcomes. While ample literature exists on learning styles and learning preferences that guide tailor-made teaching approaches to meet learner preferences, there is a small percentage of research on online learning environments (Gülbahar & Alper, 2014). Learning styles and learner preferences is an area that needs to be given more consideration given that the learners are the biggest clients and if the design of the online courses is not meeting their preferences, then the design is setting them to either opt-out or fail (Young & Norgard, 2006).

According to the results, providing enough opportunities for student-to-content, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction is important for learners in an online course. Because of the physical separation imposed by the Web-based learning environment, a dialogue among students and a dialogue between students and the instructor are critically important to reduce any misunderstandings between students and an instructor (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). There are many reasons online learners do not interact or participate in online learning platforms. Some reasons are lack of ICT skills and assistance available (Henwood, 2000), limited or no access to computers and the internet (Kirkup, 2001; Selwyn, 1998).

Students found discussion forums very useful and contributed in different ways to their learning. While forums promote interactions between student-to-student and student-to-instructor, Lesson allows interaction between student-to-content. Chat and Database tools also seemed to be the second most popular choice for interaction. While Chat allows synchronous communication, Database allows students to participate online to create, maintain a search bank of record entries. This particularly encourages students to create their content as they progress through the course. The selection of appropriate interactive tools will attract and encourage students to appreciate and use them to interact with the instructor, content and online course mates. As stated by Rovai (2002), this is linked to greater satisfaction with the academic program and a reduced feeling of isolation.

Assessment is another major feature of online courses and if not designed appropriately can lead to poor student satisfaction. While there are some similarities between face-to-face and online education assessment practises, there are many distinctions in method, emphasis, and technological advantages and challenges (Xu & Mahenthiran, 2016). One of the major difference between a traditional assessment and an online assessment is the implementation of the assessment principles in an online environment. According to Faber et al. (2017), formative e-learning assessment is used to gather evidence of students' online learning achievement. The focus of these assessments is to provide input to teachers and students to enhance assignments provided to online learners. According to Thurlow et al. (2008), online assessments are more effective than traditional assessments as it allows the instructor to reach vast number of students easily and effectively and provide timely feedback. The majority of students were satisfied with the Assessment items in their online courses.

Contrary to this, feedback to Assessments did not receive such a high response. The lack of clear timeframes for feedback on assessments or forum postings was identified as an area which needs improvement. Providing timely and comprehensive feedback to students especially in an online course is very important to keep them engaged with the course. Assessment tasks are set not just to measure a learning outcome but to help students to test their knowledge and identify the areas that need to improve. Feedback should also be used as a form of encouragement and guidance by the instructors to the learners with the intension to enhance learning (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008; Stull et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The majority of learners were satisfied with the overall online learning experience at USP. The online courses provided opportunities for greater interaction, clear assessment instructions, and timely feedback. There is an expectation from the learners that the specifics of online learning will undergo substantial change as the technology for online learning advances. The design and delivery of the online courses met the expectations of students at USP. The biggest change for learners is learning how to study online and training is necessary especially for students taking online courses for the first time. Consequently, the institution should have the infrastructure that supports the smooth running of the online courses so that the learners are not affected at any stage of their study programme. These changes are neither easy for the institution nor the learners, but the learners also have a huge role to play and that is to take ownership of their learning as they slowly shift their learning strategies to suit online learning.

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Primary School Leaders perceptions on Strategic Planning in Fiji.

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Abstract

This paper explores the perception of primary school leaders (head teachers', assistant head teachers', and senior teachers) on strategic planning in primary schools in Fiji. It examines perceptions on school strategic planning at the primary school level using qualitative research methods. One-on-one interviews were conducted with four primary schools in Fiji. The focus is on the perceptions of school leaders on school strategic planning, the purpose of school strategic plan, the people involved in the planning process, the methods employed to prepare the plan, the challenges faced, and recommendations for school strategic planning. The paper reveals that primary schools in Fiji used to prepare a four-year strategic plan to be aligned with the Fiji Education Sector Strategic Development Plan. However, lack of proper consultation with stakeholders through meetings, discussion, and community awareness programmes have limited its effectiveness. The paper highlights the difficulties encountered by school leaders in the preparation and planning processes as well as provisions for solutions to the difficulties.

Introduction

School strategic planning has been identified as one of the most crucial forms of planning for primary school leaders, implying as a process that is expected to lift the standard of primary education (Pallotta & Lingam, 2012). It is a process of planning that involves scanning the external and internal school environments, analysing and collecting data, and formulating a plan to tackle the impact of the internal and external school factors (Cheng 2013). Its significances lie on the choice of goals, objectives, and strategies to achieve goals of the schools (Lingam et al., 2014a) and drive sustainable development while avoiding wastage of scarce resources (Cheng, 2013).

In the Fijia situation, primary schools have different experiences and among school leaders, strategic planning process raise more dilemma and questions than answers. Some of the dilemma and questions include teachers' perspectives on strategic planning and actual development of school strategic plans. It also raises concerns pertaining to limited capacity of knowledge and experiences on school strategic planning among head teachers. While the school leaders were often picked on with their limited capacity to drive the planning of schools forward, the Ministry of Education's obligation is to capacitate schools leaders on different areas and levels of the school including the design, planning assessments and evaluation, and management of school programmes to ensure that school and national goals have achieved their purposes and objectives.

This study draws on perceptions of primary school leaders on strategic planning to improve key components of learning and teaching, community partnership, leadership and management, and infrastructure development. It seeks to generate information regarding school leaders' involvement in strategic planning and the space given from authorities to actively participate in the primary school planning processes. It is anticipated that the study helps to provide new insights in the area of school strategic planning for primary schools in Fiji. In particular, in the areas of teacher development, infrastructure, curriculum, pedagogical development and parental contribution so that national goals for primary school children's learning can be achieved. The questions to ponder are, to what extent is school strategic planning, understood, practiced and promoted at the primary school level? Does the Fiji

education system prioritise the development and implementation of strategic planning at the school level and if so in what ways?

Background of the study

The Republic of Fiji Islands comprises of two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, with other 332 smaller islands or atolls (100 islands are inhabited) in the southwest Pacific Ocean. The total population of Fiji is 837,271, comprising 52% indigenous Fijians, 37% Indo-Fijians and 11% are Rotumans, Chinese, and Europeans (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2007). This shows that Fiji is a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country.

The Fiji Islands has approximately 731 primary schools of which two are government schools, 713 are non-government schools, and 16 are private schools (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2015). These schools are classified either as urban, rural, or semi-urban schools and are attributed to the distance of each school from urban centres. The mission of Fiji Ministry of Education is to provide a holistic and empowering education system that enables all children to realise and appreciate fully their inheritance and potential contributing to peaceful and sustainable national development.

Since 2014, the education system in Fiji has experienced a lot of reforms including granting fee free education, free text books, and a free bus fare scheme which have opened doors and given opportunities to those students who previously could not afford to go to school. The Fiji primary education is designed in such a way that it exposes holistic development of the child mentally, physically, spiritually, culturally and shaping positive attitude towards lifelong education.

The goals on quality in learning is determined by national and school assessments and achievement is measured on examination conducted in schools. Assessments are also used to identify academic weaknesses and strengths so that educators can define pathways for improvement that can take many forms and require an assortment of refined strategies and techniques. For example, LANA (Literacy and Numeracy Assessment) is an assessment tool used for year 5 and year 7 students to provide feedback to the teachers and the parents on numeracy and literacy skills. Standard examinations are held at years 6 and 8. The major primary education outcomes sought by the Fiji Ministry of Education is to make Fiji a knowledge-based society with the best opportunities for all Fijians to achieve their maximum potential through the teaching and learning processes.

Theoretical stances

Strategic planning is considered as important to organizational development and sustainability and is seen as an avenue for proper guidance control, clear direction and appropriate pathways to achieve set goals (Wyk & Moeng, 2014). Significantly, “a living document that includes policy direction, implementation strategies, actions and benchmarks for implementation” (Wyk & Moeng 2014p. 139). It also includes an evaluation and the expenditure framework which allows adjustments in areas for development during implementation (Wyk & Moeng, 2014). It is an important part of the top management’s role and function (Rao, 2009). It is a combination of two consecutive words; strategy and planning, and organizations generally strategize their plans at an expected cycle of three to four years maximum (Allison 2011).

The strategic plan according to literature have three to four year expectancy and the significant factor is its usability and relevance to the needs of the organization as it deals with the important questions, answers, and issues that are expected to improve the organization (Allison, 2011). Strategy is the aspiration in setting direction and is focused on broad and fundamental choices, whereas planning

involves translating the strategy into concrete goals and guidance on how to achieve them (Allison, 2011). According to Kotter (2014), a strategy is a collection of actions that add value, while planning focusses on good understanding of the current situation and a vision of where the organisation wants to be in the future. Additionally, Rao (2009), defines strategy as an integrated plan to ensure that basic objectives of an organization are achieved through systematic and proper execution. A strategy is about making appropriate choices on how, when, and where to compete (Tovstiga, 2013). It is a discourse to counter organizational deficit in this fast-changing and messy world. Different authors have different perceptions and definitions for the term, strategy. In simple terms, however, strategy refers to the expected direction and scope of an organization (education system) over a longer period; that is, a long-term focus.

Apparently, a strategic plan forms part of all organization (Tovstiga, 2013). Importantly, organizations always want to progress and achieve desired outcomes, and that seemingly requires a well-developed strategic plan. Whether one works in a small or a large organization, a plan is a necessary document that directs institutions. Considering leaning institutions, a school's strategic plan is a very important document that should include the support and involvement all the stakeholders. It is a tool that enables stakeholders to increasingly contribute to the school's strategic goals and objectives that can result in long-term sustainability and improvement in the quality of education (Itegi, 2016). The creation of strategic plans is a new trend in schools which has evolved due to the need for schools to become more self-reliant and market driven (Wyk & Moeng, 2014). It is a process which identifies the future direction of an institution and maps the course of the way towards reachable destinies (Nataraja 2014). It is:

A management tool to help an organization improve its performance by ensuring that the members of the organization are working towards the same goals and by continuously adjusting the direction of the organization to the changing environment on the basis of obtaining results (UNESCO, 2010, p.10).

Learning institutions as schools ensure that deliverable learning outcomes are properly organized for learners (Nataraja, 2014). Seemingly, participation of all the stakeholders is an important aspect of school strategic planning (Myende & Bhengu, 2015) as they are the ones that will make things happen. The involvement in the strategic planning process just by school leaders is not enough. The top management of schools and those that have specific interests in the school have to be united and committed to the strategy taken before tangible development can occur (Goodstein, 2008). In such a process, the involvement and participation of stakeholders for the development of strategic plans is expected to be in an initial stage (Wyk & Moeng, 2014). To ensure ownership, teachers need to participate in the planning process and in professional development to ensure that they are knowledgeable and competent to do so (Lingam & Lingam, 2014b). This clearly tells us that if the school head teachers do not provide guidelines, delegate responsibility, and recognise the ability and expertise of teachers and other stakeholders then it will be difficult to carry out the plan.

The school strategic planning provides a deep understanding of what a school aims to achieve. It is a management tool used by schools to achieve the aims and outcomes of activities organized by the school. In this way, teachers and other stakeholders can contribute more to the development of the school as they are familiar with the school situation through planning (Cheng, 2012). Additionally, participation in planning is more important than the outcome of planning, because participation not only creates a knowledge sharing culture but also promotes ownership of the plan (ibid). It is a form of providing justification for accountability and transparency for assessment of resource utilisation and learning outcomes (Itegi, 2016). It is a mechanism to ensure the effective and efficient use of available resources and has been found to enhance the development of schools, improved transparency and accountability, improved monitoring and the management styles in a school system (Itegi, 2016). In addition, school

strategic planning provides a base for the institution to progress, in terms of efficiency and effective allocation of resources and creating more relevant structure for improving performance (Itegi, 2016). It allows for communities and other stakeholders to work together in order to accomplish set of goals and it gives the school an opportunity for stakeholders to provide support in the development of agenda and gain feedback from them.

Furthermore, strategic planning helps leaders to think and act strategically, develop effective strategies, clarify future directions for the school, establish priorities, and establish teamwork to improve performance (Itegi, 2016). It also provides understanding on how schools work, gives insights into how finances are spent, identifies the needs of stakeholders, and sets specific data-driven priorities (Itegi, 2016). The strategic plan is the document which provides the financial terms of the organization (ibid). Conversely, financial facets of the school are not found in the Pacific Islands, and in this case, Fiji. This left a huge gap in the leadership of schools in the PICs. The strategic planning process, according to Lingam et al., (2014a), is slowly becoming an important part of the education systems in Pacific Island Countries. This involves scanning or assessment of the internal and external environmental components of the school organisation, analysing the information, and formulating a plan to tackle the impact generated by the external environment (ibid).

Methods

This study used qualitative methods to collect data. The reason for this was for the researchers to get closer to the phenomena that is studied from narratives and observations to make sense of it with the experiences gained from the context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is also used for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem and it involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the respondents and data are analysed inductively (Creswell, 2012). The selection of samples in this study was made on the understanding that qualitative research does not generalise to a larger population, therefore individuals are specifically selected (Mertler, 2016). Samples in this paper were purposefully selected. In purposeful sampling, the size of the sample is determined by informational consideration (Lincoln and Guba (1985), which means maximizing information from where it is needed. Sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming (Wiersma & Jurs, 2006). The type of sampling used in this study is based on factors such as the amount of rigor for the study, the characteristics of the target population, and the availability of participants (Creswell, 2012).

The research sites are in Fiji and the Ministry of Education has four education divisions, namely; Eastern, Central, Northern, and Western. The study was conducted in the Nausori area which is one of the districts of the Central division. The Nausori education district has 116 primary schools; 15 urban and 101 semi-urban and rural. The study purposefully chose one urban, one semi-urban and two rural schools. The schools were selected due to their location. In this study, four primary schools were purposefully selected. In each school, the head teacher, assistant head teachers, and two senior staff were also purposefully selected. The schools chosen were based on their location; one urban, one semi-urban and two rural schools. The school head teachers were chosen according to their availability and their willingness to participate. There were four head teachers, five assistant head teachers (2 from urban schools, 2 from semi-urban, and 1 from rural) and eight senior teachers (2 from each selected school) made up the population in this study. These teachers were selected based on their experiences in the preparation of the school plans and the number of years of their teaching careers. This was intended to generate rich information from these highly experienced teachers in a range of school contexts – both from urban and rural schools.

Findings

The findings of this study provide school leader's perceptions on school strategic planning. It captures their perceptions on the understanding of the term, the significances of it in the development of the school, their perspectives on teaching and learning, the effect of not having a plan, their role in strategic planning and their suggestion on how it can be promoted and applied in schools.

The school leader's perceptions of strategic planning varies from each other. They understood and conceptualized the term in different ways. For instance, a head teacher relates strategic planning with educational features such as setting standards, vision for the improvement of learning:

The term strategic planning "is a way of setting up reachable standard for schools", while an assistant head teacher defines the creation of a strategic plan "as setting up vision, creating a visionary school and planning that is going to help the school to prosper in aspects of learning development of a child (SAHT).

Another primary head teacher associated strategic planning with parents' interaction in activities of the school that can benefit learners to progress and improve on their learning and a sequence of stepping stones. Another school links strategic planning with school development:

Strategic planning is there to address issues like teaching and learning, community partnership, leadership and management and infrastructure development (R1S2).

The respondents have different ways of defining the term school strategic planning. However, few of them perceived strategic plans as ideas that are put together on papers for smooth running of the school.

Strategic planning is preparing school programs that can accommodate for a three-year period (R1S1). It is developed to achieve the performance indicators and the objectives of the school (R2S1).

The strategic planning in primary schools is a significant undertaking which should not be left out of school activities. It has to be practice and plans that need to be given a three year turnover period for school improvement (R1AHT). A rural school head teacher explained it in this way:

The implementation period of school strategic plan has to be given a three-year plan because if the schools are not able to meet objectives in one year, they can continue in the second and the third year and finally complete it in the fourth year (R1HT).

Another related the importance of strategic planning with school vision. He sees it as a tool that will direct the development of the school as well as keep the vision and goals on track. Others referred to it as a long-term planning process to achieve the desired goals. It is a long-term process of planning for the future to meet the desired needs and it is a long-term plan to achieve the goals in a given period of time. A senior teacher defines it along two broad key categories:

A plan that talks about the key areas in teaching and learning development, the classroom development, and the building development in the overall running of the school (SS2). It is a plan for a school that focusses on the four key learning areas [teaching and learning, community partnership, leadership and management and the development and infrastructure] (SS1).

The importance of strategic plan covers the core of education which is the improvement of teaching and learning in schools and a plan prepared by the school leaders to focus on the strategies used by teachers for effective teaching and learning. An urban head teacher link strategic planning with the development

of school facilities to upgrade the teaching and learning process in a particular school. It is also expressed as a:

Guideline used by teachers to prepare the annual plan for the school and the individual work plan for each teacher (US2) and it acts as a bridge between the teacher's work plan and the teaching styles used in teaching (US2). It is a future plan to achieve the goals set by the schools. A strategic plan deals with the current situation of a school and lays a path to meet desired needs for the future (SHT) and it is as a set of missions, targets and strategies that deals with overall running of the school (SS2).

The findings also perceived strategic planning as a long term future plan used to achieve the goals set by the schools. Therefore, it is a very important document which forms the foundation of school functions in Fiji. When leaders of schools were asked if it is a necessity to school development and progress, this is what they said:

Strategic planning is not given space for Head teachers to be given priority, although it is a need for the strategic direction of the school and teaching and learning. It's putting ideas together collectively, for improvement at the school and formalizing it as a documentation of a school (UAHT)

It is through this plan that schools will measure students' improvement" (R2S2) and this also includes "form of building and infrastructure improvement for the school" (SS2)

Respondents further acknowledge it as a planned teaching and learning process that helps the students to achieve better marks in subject. It is a blue print where one has to work according to detailed categories just like what is referred to as a strategic plan. Several respondents highlighted the strategic plan in terms of the four key learning areas in the teaching and learning process:

It is a monitoring tool for effective management of the school whereby measurement of achievement can be done within the four key learning area, the learning and teaching key area prepares effective teaching and learning, while the infrastructure development key area focuses on the physical development aspects of the school (R1S2).

The strategic plan is important for smooth running and stable operation of rural schools. There is a greater need for the establishment of strategic plans so schools can run smoothly and effectively (R2AHT).

Another Head teacher linked its significance with forms of encouragement and the acknowledgement that teachers have because of their performances:

You know strategic planning is a form of self-evaluation for the teachers for their performance throughout the year and you know if teachers don't achieve the targets they are provided with encouragement to improve the following next year, and if they have achieved the target it is a form of acknowledgement for them (US2).

Two senior teachers relate the importance of the strategic plan with the alignment to the requirements of the Ministry of Education. They expressed:

"It is a very important document used by teachers to prepare the annual plan for the school as well as the individual work plan for each teacher" (US2).

"We teachers use strategic plan to align our work with the Ministry of Education guidelines and policies (SS1). If this document [the school strategic plan] did not exist there will be no alignment with

the Ministry of Education policies, thus leading schools to follow their own way of carrying out the planning process” (SS1).

Several respondents highlighted the importance of using the plan for achieving targets:

The result of using strategic plan in schools is to achieve the targets set and it is used to accomplish the target (R2S1) and it is through this plan the teachers, management and school work together in achieving the set target (R1AHT).

In terms of who should be responsible for strategic planning at the Primary school level, this is what headmasters have to say:

“The discussions and meetings were held prior to the designing of strategic plan. The community members, teachers, and the head teacher sit together and discuss what is going to be done and the timeframe” (R1HT).

“In my school, the plans were prepared through meetings and discussions with all the stakeholders. He further, revealed that, in her experience, firstly, the school audit was carried out followed by formal meetings with the stakeholders of the school” (US1).

Another senior teacher shared his thoughts on the importance of students’ participation in the planning process:

“Involving students into the discussion for the school plan will make a vast difference in their performance. The forum where student representatives would clarify doubts on issues and reveal the challenges faced as students and better plan will be developed once the stakeholders come to know students’ challenges” (US1).

Another senior teacher mentioned this during the interview:

The leader of the schools can divide the teachers in groups depending on the key learning areas which they are familiar with” (SS1). He also suggested that “assistant head teachers and the school heads be given the leadership and management key focus since they are well versed with it while other key focus divided upon the willingness of the teachers (SS1).

When head teachers were consulted on the limitation of strategic planning in schools, this is what they have to say:

Our responsibility as head teachers are to coordinate the planning process but sometimes the response of teachers is negative., some teachers straight away say ‘No’ to the plans, outlining the reason as not knowing the procedure. There are some teachers who are willing to prepare and participate though they don’t know the procedure and teachers who instantly say ‘no’ at first place, do participate later so that they can learn it themselves. Some teachers are a bit unenthusiastic though they don’t have depth knowledge of planning (UAHT).

Some teachers think that the planning process is the duty of the head teacher only and highlighted:

“In most cases teachers will think that it is the duty of the head teacher to design the strategic plan for the school. It is the equal duty of all the teachers, including the head teacher, to plan for the school. Ministry of Education officials came to the school and explained the protocols and procedures of carrying out the plan successfully so that teachers could learn the procedure” (SAHT).

When head teachers were asked on whether they engaged in strategic planning:

“Yes we often plan with teachers on what we want best for the school. However, the management and other stakeholders often challenge the plans stating it cannot work. They don’t believe in positive changes for the school and therefore, come up with their own reasons. School management members I my school are farmers so they overlook our responsibility to plan for the school” (R2HT).

Some head teachers find reasons to support why they do not engage in strategic planning:

“We were not supported with calls for strategic planning. The teachers say that its time consuming, and we head teachers often imposed on them plans they don’t agree with and also we head teachers often organized planning meetings after working hours which in not good for teachers” (SAHT)

“Attendance of the stakeholders is a challenging as parents and the community members do not turn up on time for meetings. All kinds of reasons are explained by them for not turning up for the meetings. Some parents live far and they have only one bus in the morning and one in the afternoon so coming for the meeting at odd times becomes difficult for them” (UAHT).

Discussions

This is inspiring look into the perceptions of school leaders on school strategic planning. The literature by Wyk & Moeng (2014) referred to it as policy direction, implementation, and actions in school strategic plans. However, strategic planning is a new trend in schools (Itegi, 2016) and is intended to focus schools to work towards achieving their goals (UNESCO, 2010). The strategic plan is focused on achieving reachable and standard goals. As discussed in the literature review, the school strategic plan is a long-term plan adopted by schools, based on the understanding of the current situation and identifying future directions. The literature further highlighted that authors have different understanding of the term school strategic plan. This study found the term to be confusing among the respondents. There description of the term varies from people to people and school to school. This confirms some of the misunderstanding school leaders held towards strategic planning.

Most of the school leaders argued that their schools have practiced school strategic planning, but indicate that it was conducted differently at schools. However, they described school strategic plan as a long term plan to achieve the vision of the school, smooth running of the school, for key learning, making a comparison between the past, the present, and the future, and a plan for teachers’ daily activities in the classroom. This study also related the school strategic plan against four broad key categories outlined by the Fiji Ministry of Education. The four key categories include teaching and learning, community partnership, leadership and management, and development and infrastructure. These are used by schools’ planning committees as a base for future plans for the school. School leaders also confirmed that the school strategic plan is a very important documentation of decisions that are formalized to lead the development of the schools to meet parents’ expectation and national goals for schools in Fiji. This is also reinforced by the literature that depicted school strategic planning as a means to adjust the direction and change the environment on the basis of achieving the results (UNESCO, 2010). Therefore, school strategic planning evolves around, how planned activities can be utilize to achieve school goals and national goals.

The study also revealed that school leaders in different ways have some knowledge of the meaning of school strategic plan and rightly link it with plans for school improvement. Some of the perceptions although were limited only to moving the school forward in terms of infrastructures, that in itself is significant for children’s learning. Apparently, the literature depicts it as a systematic plan which

organizations have agreed on and have directed stakeholder's commitment to prioritise in order to achieve the mission (Allison, 2011). The objectives of strategic planning is for teachers to prepare students to become long term learners not imposing pressure on them to achieve the set targets within the set period (ibid). This study found that school leaders and teachers in general need to be well versed with the meaning of the term school strategic plan, so that it is accepted and conducted in an appropriate manner at schools.

The Significance of school strategic planning

Puamau and Teasdale (2005) revealed that strategic planning ensures that members of an organisation have one direction and goal to work towards. This study also reveals a similar purpose of school strategic plan by school leaders recognizing the strategic plan as a plan that outlines the future direction and provides direction. The importance here is that strategic plans are made for the future but it also deals with the current situation (Allison, 2011). Therefore, school stakeholders, have to realise this, so that they can work on the current situation of the school in order to achieve future outcomes.

The findings of this study also confirmed that the importance of school strategic plan is reliant on the four key categories: learning and teaching, community partnership, leadership and management, and infrastructure development. The learning and teaching and infrastructure development forms key area that focuses on the development aspects of the school (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2015) and it is important for responsible authorities to prioritize training of leaders on strategic planning so that school goals can be sufficiently achieved. A purpose of the school strategic plan identified by respondents aligns with Itegi's (2016), who claimed that the school strategic plan provides insights on how schools financial resources are spent and that would help to ensure accountability and transparency of the school's financial resources. Itegi (2016) also argued that high consideration must be given to the planning of human resources including the teachers. As such, schools must look at teachers as the most important physical human resource who can develop the plan and whom the schools should trust to implement it. Therefore, teachers must be aware of strategic planning, the importance of the plan and how it can serve the school to achieve its set goals.

A number of suggestions were made by participants in relation to improving the planning process. First, more emphasis should be given to aspects of the infrastructure and development categories of school strategic plans. This would enable schools to develop and renovate classrooms to be more suitable for children's need. According to Barret (2015) a dull looking classroom will form a negative image, while a smart looking classroom will encourage and motivate the child to learn. Further suggestion was that, in preparation for the planning process workshops, seminars, and awareness programs needs to be organized by relevant authorities so that a comprehensive and well developed school strategic plan can be prepared in schools. According to Nyagah (2015), relevant training will equip the formulation team with necessary skills to formulate and to carry out the school strategic plan. Therefore, it can be seen that appropriate training is likely to both improve the preparation of the plan and the chances of it being successfully implemented.

The findings also suggested that the template for the plan provided by Ministry of Education should be very simple and easy to fill out. Razik and Swanson (2012) make the point that a strategic plan follows a logical order and that attempts to formalise decision making. However, the Fiji Education sector strategic development plan (2015-2018) focuses on the major seven learning outcomes of the Fiji National Curriculum Framework. According to Education Sector Strategic Development (2015-2018) the template is aligned with these learning outcomes to address the four key learning categories in the school strategic plan, namely; learning and teaching, infrastructure and development, leadership and management, and community and partnership.

A way forward

Strategic planning in Fiji Primary schools need to be factored as an important part of the role of the school leader and have to be describe under their leadership descriptions. Such expectation requires review of school leadership roles and align roles with the Ministry of Education’s Strategic Sector Education Development Plan. In Fiji school situations, the process of planning can be witnessed from the discussions and meetings conducted with the parents, teachers, and school management. There is a need for proper guidelines to be formulated and formalize it in order to guide stakeholders in the school strategic planning process. At the national level, workshops have to be organized by the Ministry of Education, with the aim to broaden knowledge about the purposes and processes of school strategic planning. Consultation with stakeholders needs to be given priority to get information that is valuable for preparation of plans for the schools.

Furthermore, teachers at times feel hesitant to be part of planning process because of their lack of knowledge about the preparation of school strategic plans. They felt unease to be involved as they perceived it is outside of their job description. They thought the preparation of the school strategic plan is solely the responsibility of the head teachers although they support school strategic planning as a way forward for greater achievements. In this regard, teachers need more support to build their enthusiasm to actively participate in school strategic planning and also go beyond what is expected of them in designing a suitable plan for the school through team work for students to gain the optimal benefits. School leaders concurred that it is not easy as there are hurdles to overcome during planning, participatory, and implementation stages of the school strategic plan. Time and unavailability of relevant stakeholders, medium of instruction and communication and unforeseen circumstances such as natural disasters have a drastic effect on the planning stage. Furthermore, lack of teamwork amongst the teachers to come to some consensus with other stakeholders who have different opinions, and inaccurate data provided by the students’ parents were identified as challenging factors. The others include limited financial resources and putting the plan into practice are the challenging factors at the implementation stage.

To address the challenges it is important to put the plan into perspective for children to be at the centre of plan. Putting children’s education at the centre by stakeholders during the planning stages will receive support in order that it makes a difference. School leaders are also convinced that participation in regular communication and collaboration with all the stakeholders would convey a vast difference in the plan. They also believed that successful implementation of the school strategic plan rests on the successful collaboration of all stakeholders.

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The development of women's rugby players within schools in Fiji

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Abstract

Women's participation in sports has often been criticized based on issues pertaining towards their ability, societal norms, and gender differences. Rugby, a male dominated sport has historically always discouraged the involvement of women into the sport. Despite the challenges, women's rugby has been growing rapidly on the international arena. This study explored women rugby players' development through their motivation, perception and challenges about playing rugby in schools. Forty-nine women playing for their respective schools and had competed at the Fiji secondary schools' rugby sevens tournament participated in interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. The results showed five themes emerging: socialization, societal perspective, physical and psychological benefits, practical and cultural barriers, and modifications to women's rugby. These findings indicate that proactive actions such as organizing more girls' rugby competitions, educational rugby activities, coaching clinics and rugby workshops in schools would be important. Moreover, there needs to be a change of mindset and attitude to women playing sports perceived to be historically masculine and a male domain, increased funding into women's rugby in schools, and the need to attract more women to play rugby and assist in the holistic development of the sport in Fiji schools.

Introduction

Rugby as a contact sport has always been perceived by society as a male dominant sport. Fields and Comstock (2008) stated that rugby is often viewed as a sport that is fast paced, aggressive and has high probability of injury. It is a sport historically perceived as appropriate for men but today women are increasingly stamping their mark on the world stage, showcasing their capabilities and skills in the sport. Rugby is growing rapidly around the globe and female players have entered onto the rugby field as a way of stating a point across to society that females can also play such contact sport (Tovia, 2014).

The Fijian 7's team, being the first Pacific women's team to qualify at the Rio Olympics in 2016, has contributed to the popularity of the sport in the Pacific region. As a result of the Rio Olympics qualification, it has pushed parenting bodies such as the Fiji Rugby Union and Fiji Women's Rugby Union to work in collaboration to develop the sport within schools in order to encourage more girls to participate in rugby. According to Schieder (2011), Fiji tends to have a healthy number of registered and active players. There are about 36,030 registered rugby players in Fiji (4.0 per cent of the total population of 901,812), even though the unofficial numbers states that there are approximately 80,000 players. Fijian males dominate the number of registered players. According to the International Rugby Board (IRB, 2011), there are 35,700 male Fijian and 330 female Fijian registered players.

Fiji is considered as one of the very few countries that regards rugby as an official national sport. This indicates the importance of the sport of rugby in Fiji and it has greatly placed a small island nation on the map visible for the world to notice. In the Olympic Games in Rio 2016, with the men's sevens team winning Fiji's first gold medal, rugby has continued to play a significant role in shaping Fiji's culture and history. Durutalo (1986) reinforced that indigenous Fijian culture can be summarized by four key institutions or what she calls the 'four Rs': ratuism, royalism (this is related to the Royal Family of Britain, Fiji's colonial rulers), religion (predominantly Christianity) and rugby. Furthermore, rugby has become an essential part of the 'vaka-i-taukei' which is perceived as the indigenous Fijian way of life. Thus, this Fijian way of life represents the characteristics such as courage and strength, which indigenous Fijians

regard as desirable physical attributes of Fijian males (Robinson, 1973; Rika, Finau, Samuwai & Kuma, 2016). Therefore, within Fijian society, the sport of rugby is commonly perceived as a masculine sport which often produces characteristics that are not seen to be desirably suited for women.

The significance of women's rugby in Fiji

Despite the limited historical records of the early beginnings of women's rugby, there have been a few researchers who have mentioned certain aspects of women's rugby, yet there are still so much that can still be uncovered. Most historical records on women's rugby are based on other nations such as England, Ireland and North America (Crewdson, 2010). These countries established and began participating in the sport in the late 1800's. This is common because rugby initially began its early stages in England in 1823 (Rika et al., 2016). In Fiji, women began playing the sport in the late 1980s (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2015). This led to a few women's rugby clubs being established within the Suva region between the year 1999 and 2000. Despite the lack of support bestowed upon establishing women's rugby clubs around Fiji, in 2006 the Fiji Women's Rugby Union (FWRU) was established in Suva (World Rugby, 2007). Similarly, in the same year, the Fiji women's team played its first ever test match in which the team lost the opening match of the inaugural Pacific Tri – Nations for women to the Samoan team (Fiji Rugby Union, 2016).

Women's rugby has progressed incrementally over recent years in Fiji and has greatly been encouraging when international tournaments was organised by the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU, 2016). For the first time, women's rugby was introduced in the Summer Olympics in 2016, has also raised much awareness on the development of women's rugby. There is still more work to be done in the development of the sport within schools in Fiji. However, there is a slow rise in popularity of women's rugby in Fiji. This slow progression in developing girls and women solely relies upon public support, resources and financing. According to Kanemasu and Molnar (2015), most contributions to the development of women's rugby over the past years was only credited to the amount of effort, commitment, and sacrifice of the players, coaches and supporters who have managed to complete the hard yards in coordinating and organizing local tournaments. The support base of women's rugby had been strong and resilient despite challenges they face in terms of resources, play space, trained officials, and playing equipment. The FRU is working closely with the Fiji women's rugby union trying to break barriers of gender discrimination within the sport of rugby and develop programs in order to create opportunities for girls and women to challenge themselves in trying something new in rugby (IRB, 2016). There is a total of 12 women's rugby clubs in Fiji. A total of 4 clubs are affiliated clubs and 8 clubs are non-affiliated clubs (IRB, 2016). In Fiji, with a total population of 441, 686 female, there have been only 775 females that have participated in official rugby (IRB, 2016).

Kanemasu and Molnar (2015) explored the challenges faced by female rugby players regarding gender and sexuality in Fiji. They state that Fiji being a male dominated post-colonial society is dominantly constructed in male hegemony. Navigating around hegemonic structures in sports including the world of rugby can be daunting for the female athlete. Additionally, Kanemasu and Molnar (2015) state that although women's rugby is slowly improving, players do face challenges in securing financial and technical support as well as emotional support from their families, rugby bodies and the general public. Moreover, Kanemasu and Johnson (2017) investigated the community attitudes towards women's rugby in Fiji in which there is general disapproval of women's participation in rugby in sections of society.

The Fiji Secondary Schools Rugby Union (FSSRU) is an organization responsible in coordinating and organizing the local competition named the 'Deans Competition' for secondary schools' rugby in Fiji. The organization works closely with the main rugby body in increasing participation by girls in schools and

ultimately it can be an avenue in developing potential players that could potentially represent Fiji in the future. Once a year the FSSRU structures its school competition into six zones that consists of the North, East, West, Baravi and Maritime zones (FRU, 2016). Each zone competes for a spot in the national Deans competition that normally takes place at the end of term 2 in an academic school year. This competition is classified as one of the oldest competitive tournaments that was first introduced in 1939. However, in terms of school girls' rugby it was only in 2015 that the Fiji rugby union launched the first ever Fiji Secondary School Girls' 7s tournament in Suva. Out of the 170 secondary schools in Fiji, a total of 20 school girls' teams participated in the Fiji Secondary Schools girls' 7s tournament which was initiated to showcase the talents of the girls and to promote women's rugby in the country (FRU, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The gender theories particularly feminist theories would be important to consider since this study tends to explore the development of women in a masculine sport. Rugby has always been classified as a tool for creating hegemonic masculinity which in turn depicts the maintenance of a gendered society (Follo, 2007; Light & Kirk, 2000; Schacht, 1996). However, with the involvement of women in rugby, it has challenged societal structures that suppress female participation in sports that are viewed as highly masculine. The feminist theory was initially created as a way to examine the reasons and solutions for gender inequalities (Lorber, 2005). In society, individuals are dictated by the way every aspect of life is referred to either masculine or feminine. Most places within society are being dominated by men, thus women tend to be viewed as inferior. This perception has hugely contributed towards the gender inequality and barriers in the sporting arena. According to Follo (2007), gender inequality is present within a structure of gendered social order where men and women are treated differently and this produces different privileges among the genders.

The two common feminist theories that help when discussing women in sports are liberal and radical feminism. Liberal feminism is an approach that deals with attempting to remove the perception of women being treated differently to men. Hargreaves (1994) states that liberal feminism does not dwell on women's biological characteristics that indicate women are not good enough to participate in sport but believes if given similar opportunities as the men, they can succeed. Similarly, Lorber (2005) indicates that liberal feminism claims that gender differences should not be based on biology but should view that women and men are equal. Scraton and Flintoff (2013) indicates that liberal sports feminism often advocates for girls and women to gain access to sports. Yet, women's participation within masculine sport is perceived otherwise due to the masculine characteristics bestowed within the sport.

Lorber (2005) indicates that women should have the same rights, educational and work opportunities as their male counterparts. Therefore, in order for this to happen, liberal feminists attempt to work within the existing hierarchical structures to accomplish equal rights for both genders. In sport, liberal feminism aims to increase the participation and involvement of women in sport, to enable the same rights, privileges and benefits given to men to be experienced by women (Follo, 2007). Therefore, despite sports perception being dominated by males, liberal feminist researchers tend to challenge the participation of women into sports to break the stigma of gendered stereotypes. Today, there is an increasing number of women participating in male dominated sports which tend to show the need to break away from the negative perception placed upon women in sports. However, women's development in sports, particularly masculine sports such as rugby, is still being marginalized within patriarchal societies.

Radical feminists view the sports arena as dominated by males due to its structure that is embedded with masculine individuality. According to Theberge (1981), sports is a male construct which

is based on attributes and characteristics of masculine traits which an individual must have in order to succeed in the sports arena. Radical feminism advocates recreating sport to suit and celebrate women's values (Scruton & Flintoff, 2002). In addition, radical feminist researchers tend to restructure sports in order to eliminate the foundation of the male construct that has been embedded for so long (Follo, 2007). This study advocates both liberal and radical feminism to discuss the development of women in a masculine sport within schools. These feministic theories both aim to eliminate the treatment of women being either inferior or different to men but with varying perspectives. Liberal feminists work within the system to eliminate the differences between men and women whereas radical feminists want to change the system by reconstructing the sport structure to include feminine traits.

Methodology

This study is qualitative approach in nature and seeks to draw answers on the development of women's rugby players in schools. According to Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2011), a qualitative approach is a type of scientific research that can help produce findings that were not determined in advance and collected evidence to answer the research questions (Mack, et al., 2011). This approach is appropriate to this study because it is effective in obtaining culturally specific information based on the values, opinions, behaviors and social contexts (Mack et al., 2011) of women rugby players at schools. This study sought to answer the following research questions: a) What factors influence these girls to participate in school rugby? b) What are the benefits of participating in rugby for these girls? c) What are the challenges faced by the rugby girls? d) In what ways have these women tackled these challenges?

A total of forty-nine women rugby players competing within the national secondary school competition volunteered to participate in the study. These women represented their respective schools from three different school zones within Fiji. The school zones consist of Southern (Suva and the Nausori corridor, Namosi and Serua area), Eastern (Tailevu and Lomaiviti schools), and Western (Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka, Ba and Tavua schools). These individuals were selected across eight schools from within the four zones. Seventeen participants were interviewed within the Western zone schools, sixteen participants were within the Southern and sixteen in the Eastern zone schools. These locations and schools were selected based on their participation in the National secondary schools 7's competition. These participants were selected as they also form a diverse sample of individuals between rural and urban schools of Fiji. The sampling was purposive sampling and Hyener (1999) states "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice versa) including even the type of participants" (p.156). Welman and Kruger (1999) prefer this sampling method due to it being referred to as a non-probability sampling which identifies only the primary participants (Groenewald, 2004). Thus, participants were selected based on the purpose of the study (Greig & Taylor, 1999; Groenewald, 2004) and those individuals that have experiences solely related to the phenomenon being investigated (Kruger, 1988), in this case, girls participating in school rugby.

This study utilized interviews with participants to obtain data that would contribute to answering the research questions. Interview methods are well suited for this study because a large amount of significant information about the experiences of others can be collected by directly talking or questioning people (Woods & Eagly, 2015). Therefore, obtaining data in the study involved the participants' experiences and perspectives on their development within the sport of rugby. The interviews were ideal in obtaining data on individuals' personal histories, perceptions and experiences based on sensitive topics being explored (Mack, et al., 2011). Approvals were taken from their school principals and contact was made with the teacher in charge of the girl's rugby team, who then assisted

in selecting the participants. The data was collected during school hours, mainly targeting participants during recess and lunch breaks. Ethical approval was also received from the University of the South Pacific Human Research Ethics Committee and also a permit from the Ministry of Education was granted to conduct research in the schools.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The interviews consisted of twenty questions structured around five key themes: improvement, perception, characteristics, future in a male dominated sport and general background information. Interviews were conducted through the use of the English language. However, some questions were translated in *i-Taukei* dialect. This approach enabled the participants to be relaxed and comfortable in expressing their opinions in an open manner. The interchange in the use of the English and *i-Taukei* language during the interview proved successful. The interviews were carried out by the researcher and a research assistant. The researcher was able to conduct interviews within two schools, however, a research assistant collected data from two Western schools and another assisted in conducting interviews in four schools on the Suva-Nausori corridor (Eastern and Southern schools).

Data Analysis

The study used a thematic analysis as a way to analyse the data being collected. Thematic analysis is considered as a qualitative analytical method whereby the data is being identified, analysed and determined from common patterns shown within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the authors stated that, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Therefore, this study looked across the data and identified common issues that reappear and then identify the main themes that summarised all the views that had been collected on the field.

Findings

The findings have been put into four general sections: (i) Motives for starting to play rugby, (ii) perception of playing rugby, (iii) factors that contribute to participation in rugby, and (iv) growth of the sport in schools.

Motives for starting to play rugby

Twenty-four participants indicated that they were interested in playing rugby because of watching the Fijiana 7s team on television, watching the games of the men’s Fiji 7s team and also watching boys school rugby competitions. This is highlighted by the following comments:

“Seeing skills displayed by the Fijiana team on TV made me interested in playing rugby”. “I become interested in playing rugby by watching seven series and some rugby competition that were held in school”. “Watching our rugby boys, with their rugby skills that they learn during their training in school was one way it has motivated me to take interest in rugby”. “By looking at the playing skills of some rugby 7s stars like Jerry Tuwai and admire the skills...got interested in rugby”. “I am a big fan of rugby, I see pictures of the Fiji team on Facebook, and I wanted to play rugby (24).

Ten of the participants mentioned that it was through their family, either their brother or father and within the village or community setting which influenced them to play rugby. This was illustrated by the following participants who stated:

“My interest grew when I saw my brother playing, and he is like my role model. Through his interest it has motivated me to take up rugby”. “I saw my brother playing and wanted to play rugby”. “When I was home and it was my game to play rugby”. “From a younger age I used to love the sport and I usually play with my younger brothers at home” (10).

The desire to try out another sport and noticing the new inclusion of women’s rugby were reasons given by four participants. The following responses articulate these opinions:

“It is not common with us girls to play rugby so I thought to give it a try”. “Because I usually play netball, then I thought to give it a try and play rugby”. “I was interested because it was new in women’s field” (4).

One participant indicated that they started playing rugby because her friends encourage her to play the sport. This is highlighted by the following comment:

“I was encouraged by my peers, because of my built” (1).

Other reasons mentioned by the participants included the opportunities to travel overseas, being a huge fan of rugby, and to showcase talents.

Perspectives of playing rugby

Twenty-nine of the participants mentioned the perceptions offered by their families which were positive and encouraging and uplifted their morale to perform better on the field. However, eleven participants indicated that their families were against the fact that they participated in rugby because it is a sport suited for their male counterparts. Four participants stated that their families had a neutral perspective of them participating in a male dominated sport. The following comments by participants illustrate these reasons:

“They are proud of me playing rugby”. “They are fine with it and very supportive”. “To become successful in life”. “They think it’s better, as long as I strive hard to reach my goals” (29).

“They say that we don’t need to play the boy’s rugby”. “They discourage me from playing because of sustaining injuries, having negative thoughts that I could be a lesbian and might sustain breast cancer due to someone stepping me when I get tackled”. “Oh my gosh, they think negative thoughts like getting injured and all” (11).

Eighteen participants indicated that their friend’s perspectives towards them playing rugby was negative and often discouraging to hear. The following comments demonstrated this point:

“Friends think that rugby is only for boys but they don’t see some good side in playing rugby”. “Tease us and say that we might end up being a lesbian”. “Some of friends who are lady like, discourage me from playing rugby because of getting injured”. “It is a boy’s game and I can be a tomboy” (18).

However, twenty-six participants as illustrated by the comments below, talked about the perceptions received from their friends that was encouraging and often built their confidence to do better on the field:

“A few of my friends encourage me to play rugby, and to represent the school and bring victory”. “My friends think that rugby is my sport to play because of the way I look”. “They first underestimated me then as time goes on they think it suits me to play rugby” (26).

Other participants mentioned that their friends did not care much of them participating in rugby.

Forty-one participants agreed that the societal perspective has changed into accepting that women have the ability to play a male dominated sport. This is evident through their responses below:

“The Fijiana team has improved in their game”. “More girls are beginning to choose rugby as a sport to play”. “Before people took for granted on the participation of women in rugby, but now they are more serious by showing their support in the sport”. “People accept girls to play rugby because they can go outside Fiji and represent Fiji in other country”. “International participation has proved that perceptions of others have changed”. “It’s actually changing, the FRU are supporting the Fijiana and they are encouraging the secondary schools to take part”. “Because women are too emotional because they play with their heart” (41).

Benefits and challenges of rugby participation

All participants agreed that they have gained a lot of positive aspects from playing rugby. Thirteen participants shared that rugby assisted in maintaining their fitness and provided a chance to live a healthy life. The following comments demonstrated these points:

“Rugby helps me to train my mind and it gives me strength to perform well on the field”.
“Physically builds me up and makes me healthy”. “It maintains our healthy living standard and also our fitness standard” (49).

A chance to visit other countries abroad, travelling to other schools and meeting other people were the responses from fourteen participants who showed rugby could offer them those opportunities. This viewpoint was evident in their comments:

“Winning big tournaments and being famous worldwide”. “To be able to travel around the world and represent Fiji in other countries”. “A chance to represent our school and travel to other schools and make friends” (14).

Eight participants, as illustrated by the comments below, felt that playing rugby positively impacted them in producing self-confidence and self-discipline enabling them to tackle issues in life.

“Helps me not to be shy”. “Makes me feel good, knowing that not only males can play rugby”.
“Makes me feel confident, being able to take a tackle, makes me strong as a girl”. “It can help a person to play with self-confidence and play to become a good sportswoman” (8).

Moreover, thirteen participants explained that playing rugby provided an opportunity to display their skills and a chance to consider rugby as a career pathway:

“It gives an opportunity to learn new skills and things in rugby”. “It gives opportunity to those that don’t have any other choice in other sports”. “Gives us an opportunity to showcase our talents”.
“It provides a chance for those who don’t do well in school to do well in sports” (13).

Thirty participants mentioned that one common negative aspect of playing rugby was that it has a high risk of injury. The following comments by the participants illustrated these reasons:

“Sustaining injuries from playing rugby, like after one game two of our team mates got injured from a dangerous tackle which made them unable to attend school for one week”. “High risk of injuries, one time I got injured and the ambulance arrived really late”. “Some injuries we might get will affect us later in life” (30).

The negative stigma attached to women playing rugby was commented on by twelve participants:

“The negative comments that are often said by people, saying those who play rugby will be lesbians”. “Negative comments like rugby is only meant for the boys”. (12).

Similarly, two participants felt that gender barrier is present during their participation in a male dominated sport:

“Trying to balance rugby and my studies”. “My father said, if I don’t balance my school work and playing rugby then I will have to stop playing” (2).

Despite the progress of women’s rugby, stamping their mark on the world stage, three participants commented on the lack of career opportunities for women’s rugby players:

“There is limited career opportunities for women in rugby”. “I think there is not enough jobs out there for women rugby players, like those of us who don’t do well in school but are good in rugby what is there for us” (3).

Growth of the sport in schools

Twelve participants stated that they would change the technical aspect of the way rugby is being played within women’s rugby. This is evident through their responses below:

“In seven’s rugby there should not be any drop kick used, but to use the kicking tees”. “The seven’s rugby to change to ten’s rugby”. “There should be a bigger ball used in women’s rugby”. “We need to change the referees; we need professional referees to control the games”. “To be more specific in the way high tackle is taken, because during the game, even if I touch my opponent shoulder that is consider a high tackle, just touch”. (12)

However, fourteen participants’ insights are based on gender-related changes:

“Girls to be treated and trained the same ways as boys are trained; girl’s rugby should be taken seriously like boy’s rugby, so there should be fair treatment between boys and girls”. “By having a lot of competitions so that people can watch us and change the mindset and negative comments of people”. “To remain the same, because girls will play the same rules as the boys, and so will have the same mindset”. “Remain the same because women will not be degraded but treated similar to the boys playing rugby” (14).

Twenty-five participants indicated that there is no need to change any aspect of the way rugby is being played for the women as this will bring about a lot of chaos in re-learning the sport. Their following comments are illustrated below:

“No, we don’t need to change how rugby is played; it will not be fun and exciting”. “Leave it as it is, but at times the rules are different between training and during the game, I think we should leave it as how the men’s play the game so people don’t get confused” (25).

Despite the high risk of injury sustained by these women rugby players, the laws of women’s rugby are identical to the laws of men’s rugby and thirty-nine participants wished for the laws to remain unchanged. Their reasons are as follows:

“It should remain the same, if we change it, it will not be like rugby, and also because we already know the rules of the sport”. “The laws should remain the same because it makes the game

interesting and the contact sports are fun". "If I had to change one aspect of rugby, I would just leave it as it is, because more changes require more learning" (37).

Nevertheless, ten participants' comments were based on the laws of women's rugby:

"There should be less contact placed in women's rugby, similar to touch rugby". "There should be less contact, like maybe have only three tackles per team and change over, it's like touch rugby and rugby league, that way it's less likely to have more injuries" (10).

In the history books, rugby has always been classed as a sport for men. Recently, with women's rugby rising to popularity on the world stage, a lot of attention needs to be focused on the improvement of the development of the sport at the grassroots level especially in schools. The forty-nine participants in the study illustrated their opinions below:

"The ground where we usually do our training needs upgrading". "We need specialist coaches from the FRU to visit us and teach us the proper way to play rugby". "The school should allow us to play more competition so that we can be better in playing rugby". "There is not enough training equipment in school to assist in our training". "Less proper equipment to use in training, we prefer to go train at the stadium because the ground is good". "The correct rugby techniques needs to be taught by the right and experienced coaches so we better ourselves" (49).

Despite the slow progression of women showing interest and participating in rugby, the forty-nine participants felt that there is still more work to be done in order to increase the participation of women in the sport of rugby:

"There also needs to be more attention placed on women rugby clubs, to have more women participating in rugby". "They should be more serious in including rugby in primary school level, so more can play rugby". "All high schools should have rugby for girls to play, many girls will play". "Everyone to work together, the same respect given to men's rugby should also be shown in the women's' rugby" (49).

With over four years since the introduction of national secondary school girls' rugby sevens competition in Fiji, forty-six participants in the study strongly believe that women's rugby in schools will greatly improve in future:

"I believe that my school will grow in the future in terms of rugby, because we are winning, and the school is letting us play". "I think, women rugby players in schools will be traveling overseas for games" "More will take up rugby in schools, because the Fijian team are playing more in other countries". "It will grow bigger, last year, we had less number, but this year a lot are continuing to participate" (46).

However, three participants thought that if the processes and structures of the Fiji Rugby Union are not maintained, then women's rugby will continue to struggle in lifting the sport in the country:

"At the moment some old scholars are for it and some are against it, so I am not quite sure, maybe as long as our girls keep reigning from competitions, then I believe that the sport will continue to grow in this school and in Fiji". "The culture of women's rugby will die out if it is not maintained". "If everyone keeps working together then I think women's rugby will grow (3).

Discussion

The main objective for this study is to examine the development of women rugby players within schools in Fiji. Socialization on sports tends to trigger involvement of these participants into the sport of rugby. Coakley (2003) stated that socialization is interactive “through which we actively connect with others, synthesize information, and make decisions that shape our own lives and the social world around us (p. 98). Consequently, the participants to this study are within a stage of life where their selective behaviors are vulnerable as they accept choices and decisions made by other members of a social group. Grusec and Hastings (2007) state that young people are active agents within the socialization process where their identity is being formed by older members such as their parents. Therefore, with the participants ranging within the adolescent years, this period allows them to easily be connected to a sport which is greatly influenced by people closest to them such as their families. The three crucial agencies which influence people’s socialization into a sport are family, peers and school (Spaaij & Anderson, 2010; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013). While there are those in their social group who are supportive of their participation in rugby, there are also reactions from family members and their peers that can be contradictory and unsupportive.

Carle and Nauright (1999) stated that injury fear is normally given by family members but their perceptions often changed when they begin to watch a game or come to the realization that physical contact was relative. Responses from participants to this study also depicted a similar encounter which showed the manner in which family members reacted negatively and later changed knowing that they can do well. Moreover, according to a report from Women in Sport organization [WIS] (2011) “girls are highly motivated by social aspects of participation and much influenced by the behavior of their friends – particularly as they get older” (p. 6). It is evident that through these participants’ responses, their friends’ opinions on their involvement in rugby matters most to them. Therefore, their friend’s perception has a strong effect towards their participation in rugby. Similarly, Russell (2004) found that one of the main reasons behind participation of women in sports is due to their friendships. Women participate in rugby for the social and team oriented objectives rather than competitive or reward oriented goals (Russell, 2004). Despite the negative perceptions that may exist, playing rugby provides an opportunity to make new friends who share the same values, and goals as them. This is reinforced by Smith and Eli (2007) who suggest that it is common to see that friends and peers of female rugby players greatly influenced them towards participation in sports. The authors added that as age progresses, the influence of friends tends to dominate the individual’s decision about participating in a particular sport (Smith & Eli, 2007).

This study also showed that societal perspective and often negative perspectives still prevail in sports that is considered to be a male sport such as rugby. This study also found that girls playing rugby at school can often be labelled as Lesbians or Tomboys. Society generally has expected roles, actions, and behaviors that male and females should espouse. Thus, Wilde (2006) stressed that the world presumes that males are strong, independent, and athletic, but females are expected to be quiet, obedient and attractive beings. In sports that are classed as male dominated, females are questioned, labelled and ridiculed over their involvement in sports, especially if women are playing contact sport such as rugby (Wilde, 2006). The participation of women in sports has often been regarded as less valued as sports are mostly male dominated and reflects masculine traits such as aggression, strength and competition (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004), even though female participation in traditionally male sports such as football, rugby and boxing have attracted more female participation over the years (Wilde, 2006; Zimmermen, & Reaville, 1998).

Thus, participants’ responses have indicated that those societal perspectives have begun to change and they begin being appreciative of the involvement of women in a male dominated sport. Despite the negative societal perception, these participants have distanced themselves from gender

issues and have concentrated on improving the reputation of women's rugby within society. Lopiano (2000) added that change is also evident in increased government funding in female sports and this has contributed to more women participating in sports (Lopiano, 2000), more females attending rugby workshops in Fiji which can help break the mindset that rugby is only suited for males (Mannan, 2017).

This study also found that there is still glaring differences between women and men's rugby in Fiji, evident in part, through the lack of local women's rugby competitions and a lack of media coverage in the country. There are many men's teams at club level compared to women's teams. However, from all the general responses of participants, it can be gathered that despite the rigour that is attached to rugby, participating in it has provided them with positive and has enhanced the physical, social, mental and spiritual being of these female rugby players. For these participants, the link between the physicality and bodily sacrifice for the team and their school creates a positive aspect of playing the sport. According to Fields and Comstock (2008), women who play rugby tend to gain confidence, toughness, and sense of self from the sport. Broad (2001) also suggested that there is usually something about women's participation in rugby which gives them strength to be a different kind of woman. Participants to this study also agreed that playing rugby provided them opportunities such as creating strong social bonding between the players in the team and also with other players from other schools.

Rugby is a contact sport which requires an individual to be physically fit, strong and be able to combat the aggressiveness embedded within the sport. One of the barriers mentioned by participants is the risk of injury since rugby is a collision sport which can impose stress on the body, thus increasing the risk of injury. Comstock and Fields (2005) also expressed that a high risk of injuries troubles many who play rugby. In a cross-sectional study of American female rugby players, evaluating the player's perspective towards foul play and the association between foul play and injury, found that more injuries occur due to foul play (Comstock & Fields, 2005). Other practical barriers that were common in the participants' responses include: lack of equipment; less qualified coaches; and minimal access to facilities due to funding shortfalls. According to WSFF (2009), women's limited access to facilities is due to the prioritizing of male sports. Evans (2008) identified that costly equipment and travelling are contributing factors towards women's participation in sports. This study found that there is need and potential to pour in more funding into girls' rugby in schools to help it grow.

Cultural barriers impact on the way women's rugby is depicted within society (Howe, 2001). According to a report by the *Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation* (2008), women and girls feel like outsiders or are marginalized due to sports being perceived as a male dominated activity. Hence, participants in this study expressed that being a rugby player is viewed and questioned as being contradictory to their femininity and sexuality. Respondents indicated being labelled lesbians for playing rugby. Howe (2001) stated that with rugby being considered masculine in nature, the structure of rugby is seen as suited to the masculinity of men. In the Fiji secondary school girl's rugby competition, there have only been limited changes conducted in the structure of how rugby is played to enable these women in adapting to the physicality of the sport. However, in the adult grade the women's rugby union laws are identical to the men's rules (World Rugby Laws, 2017).

Some responses from the participants in this study insisted for changes to occur in the way rugby is played to make it less a contact sport. Therefore, the modifications raised by the participants were mainly related to technical changes of the sport including the alteration of the laws of rugby to suit women's participation in rugby. There are also participants who suggested that the laws of rugby remain unchanged, since modifications would lessen the excitement in the way rugby is normally played. There have also been strategies placed to eradicate the barriers and issues faced by women rugby players. These strategies do not eliminate the structures of rugby but highlight ways that would assist girls and women in being involved in the way rugby is being played and structured. Given the support and

encouragement from close family and friends it would enable more girls and women to participate in rugby (Booth et al., 1997). Other strategies include giving playing opportunities, girls to practice with qualified coaches (Malaxos & Wedgewood, 1998), the acknowledgement of women involvement in sports through media coverage (Gilson et al., 2001), providing safe playing areas (Henderson & Grant, 1998) and educating coaches about female bodies and the struggle faced by female rugby players, social status and performance (Rhea, 1998).

Conclusion

Women's rugby in schools is still a work in progress. There are positive and negative aspects towards women playing rugby in schools. The growth of women's rugby in schools depends on schools' initiatives in accommodating the interests of girls who wish to participate in rugby. The Fiji Rugby Union also has a task in developing the sport in schools through providing workshops and clinics to train parents, teachers, students and the community. Negative community attitudes on female participation in a sport considered a domain of men is increasingly changing and so is the number of girls being involved in rugby. The Fijiana qualified in the 2016 Olympics and not as a wild card, giving momentum to the increased popularity of women's rugby and girls who want to participate in rugby. With continuous development, the Fijiana has the potential to be on the podium at the Olympics just as their male counterparts did.

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Teacher attitudes towards the introduction of disability-inclusive education in Kiribati

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Abstract

This study investigates I-Kiribati teacher attitudes to the concept of disability-inclusive education through a survey of Years 1 and 2 teachers and two school-based focus groups. The results indicate broad acceptance of the concept of disability-inclusive education by teachers in Kiribati. Teacher attitudes were generally positive and there was a developing awareness of strategies to cater for the needs of students with disabilities. Challenges include lack of resources and teacher training.

Introduction

The Republic of Kiribati is a small island nation centrally located in the Pacific Ocean with 32 atolls straddling the equator across a distance of 3,900 kilometres east to west. The population according to the 2015 census was 110,136 (Kiribati National Statistic Office, 2015) with over 50,000 living in the capital, Tarawa. The population is 99% ethnically I-Kiribati¹. Kiribati is classified as a least developed nation; “Kiribati has few natural resources and is one of the least developed Pacific Island countries (World Fact Book, 2018). Primary school enrolments were 15,117 students (Kiribati National Statistic Office, 2015). Attendance figures, including children of school age not attending school, were not reported.

Although the term ‘inclusive education’ has been used to broadly refer to school programs which cater for a range of children who may have been historically excluded from school programs, particularly in local community mainstream schools, in Pacific island nations the focus of inclusive education has been primarily on children with disabilities (Puamau & Pene, 2009). Disability-inclusive education is a relatively new concept in Pacific island nations and is only slowly developing in practice; “Widespread implementation [in Pacific Island nations], has been slow, and inclusive education has not gained significant traction at the level of practice” (Miles, Lene, & Merumeru 2014). The focus of this paper is on the attitudes of teachers in Kiribati towards disability-inclusion.

Developing countries, such as small Pacific Island nations, have particular challenges regarding inclusion of children with disabilities. Access to education, such as found in geographically isolated outer islands, is often restricted given the challenges of limited resourcing and local cultural factors (Klees, 2010; Miles, 2007). The local neighbourhood school is generally the only educational provision, and local factors such as community and teacher attitudes, teacher skills and lack of resources present significant barriers to enrolment of children with disabilities.

In Kiribati, disability-inclusive education is a relatively new concept. The following factors have contributed towards a lack of interest or awareness in addressing disability-inclusive education as an area of educational need (Yates, 2018):

- Historically, the government has been reluctant to become involved in issues which are seen as primarily family concerns. Whether a child attends school is one such issue;
- Lack of government finances to provide anything beyond basic educational provisions of limited classroom resources (e.g. writing materials) and teacher salaries; and

¹ I-Kiribati is the local term for the people of Kiribati

- Negative attitudes towards the education of children with disabilities.

Inclusive education initiatives, largely funded and developed through Australian Aid programs, have promoted the concept of disability-inclusion at a systems level. For example, the Kiribati Inclusive Education Policy (Government of Kiribati, 2015) has been adopted as formalizing inclusive education as a guiding principle for the Kiribati education system. However, practical implementation in Kiribati schools of disability-inclusive education has been limited (Smith & McNaughton 2018).

Who is included and who is excluded from school programs depends on factors such as attitudes towards particular groups such as people with disabilities. This means that some individuals may still be excluded through the actions and attitudes of the society. For example, a child may not be sent to school because of the shame associated with disability or fears by the parents that the child will not be looked after. Teacher attitudes can mean that a child is excluded because the teacher does not see that the child belongs in their classroom.

In Pacific Island nations, teacher attitudes and lack of understanding and knowledge have been identified as barriers to inclusive education (McDonald & Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013; Page et al., 2018; Sharma et al., 2018). Jolly and Rokete (2012) identified attitudes towards children with disabilities in Kiribati as a significant factor in school exclusion:

There was a strong finding that attitudes were the most disabling barrier for children with disabilities being able to attend school. This included the attitudes of the community, parents, teachers, principals, the Ministry of Education, students and children with disabilities themselves. Many people believe children with disabilities cannot learn (p. 17).

Teacher attitudes are central to the implementation of any new initiative such as disability-inclusive education. “Teachers are seen as key persons to implement inclusive education. Positive [teacher] attitudes are therefore argued, as playing a considerable role in implementing this educational change successfully” (de Boer, Pijl & Minaert 2011, p. 1). A positive attitude by teachers towards accepting students with disabilities as belonging in the classroom is a major influence for their successful inclusion.

Method

This study investigates I-Kiribati teacher attitudes towards disability-inclusive education through a survey of teachers and two school-based focus groups.

The survey of teachers sampled concerns about disability-inclusive education (modified from Sharma & Desai, 2002). The survey was conducted with Year 1 and 2 teachers in North and South Tarawa as part of the Inclusive Education Awareness Raising module for the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) program. There were 99 responses. Survey items that were of most concern and of least concern to the teachers were then identified (see Table 1 below).

For the focus groups, a broad set of questions was used to generate discussion. Although the core set of questions was similar (for example ‘What do think about inclusive education?’) there was some variation to focus on particular local issues and clarifications. Values coding (Saldana, 2013) was used to identify teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education. Values coding involved identifying phrases which were grouped to form generative sub-themes using key words for values ‘important’ and for attitudes ‘think’, ‘feel’. Three themes were identified by grouping the phrases:

- Attitudes toward people and children with disabilities
- Support for inclusive education principles

- Responses to inclusive education initiatives

Analysis of the phrases also provided a comparison between Focus Group 1 (6 teachers) which, as a model inclusion school, had received extensive input and support and Focus Group 2 (4 teachers), from a neighbouring school which had received little input or support concerning disability-inclusive education (as for most schools across Kiribati).

Results

Table 1 below summarises the results for the teacher survey:

| Items causing the most concern (more than 50% of respondents were very concerned) | Items causing the least concern (less than 40% of respondents were very concerned) |
|---|--|
| I will not be able to cope with disabled students who do not have adequate self-care skills students (58%) | I will not receive enough incentives (additional allowances) to integrate students with disabilities (29%) |
| There will be inadequate admin support to implement the inclusive education program (57%) | My overall performance as a classroom teacher will decline (32%) |
| My school will not have adequate special education instructional materials and teaching aids (56%) | I will have to do additional paperwork (36%) |
| I do not have the knowledge and skills to required teach children with disabilities (54%) | Overall academic standards of the school will suffer (37%) |
| There will be inadequate staff available to support students (52%) | Students with disabilities will not be accepted by non-disabled students (39%) |
| My school will have difficulty accommodating students with various disabilities because of access/buildings (50%) | |

Note: This survey was taken at the end of the teacher professional development training module on inclusive education awareness which may have influenced teachers towards a positive view of disability-inclusive education.

The survey results indicate a broad acceptance of the concept of disability-inclusive education amongst teachers in Kiribati. Less than 50% (46%) of responses averaged across all survey items were rated as being 'very concerned' with 36% being rated 'a little concerned' and 18% being 'not concerned'. This means that 54% of respondents overall were not particularly concerned about issues related to disability-inclusive education. There were only 6 items out of 21 for which 50% to 58% of respondents were 'very concerned' therefore even for the item causing the most concern (self-care needs) 42% of respondents were not 'very concerned'.

Some teachers were apprehensive about being able to cater for the needs of students with disabilities as reflected in the survey (I will not be able to cope with disabled students who do not have adequate self-care skills students with 58% very concerned). Teachers were concerned about having adequate resources (survey 56% very concerned) and about their lack of skills and knowledge to teach children

with disabilities (54% very concerned). They were also concerned about inadequate staffing levels (52% very concerned).

On the positive side teachers were not overly concerned about receiving additional incentives, the effect on their overall performance as a classroom teacher, additional paperwork, the effect on the overall academic standards of the school or acceptance of students with disabilities by non-disabled students.

Table 2 below summarises the results from the focus groups:

| Table 2 | | |
|---|---|--|
| Values and attitudes coding. | | |
| Attitudes towards people and Children with disabilities | Support for inclusive education principles | Responses to inclusive education initiatives |
| Teachers are not trained to teach disabilities (FG1) | It's a good idea to give opportunity for those who have been left out or ignored (FG1) | Sometimes we feel uncomfortable. We don't feel right if we are not successful (FG1) |
| Even though they have handicapped children they must make sure it's very important for their learning (FG1) | It [inclusive education] is a very good idea and no one is going to be locked away from the teacher (FG1) | Our job is to think about what we are going to do (FG1) |
| They [children with disabilities] need to be included in these programs in this school so we can teach them or we can encourage them to be involved in the school. They can be part of the school (FG1) | It's a good idea because those who are disabled must be included with those who are not (FG2) | [We] try to cater for them according to their ability. We have types of ways, different activities. We try to let them work with the easy activities, encourage them (FG1) |
| People might look at them because they are not the same. The other children can learn from them (FG1) | We hope that in the future everyone will be equal (FG1) | It's hard for the teacher. We don't have much knowledge, especially of the disabled (FG2) |
| The awareness of inclusion helps the future of those who are handicapped (FG1) | No more discrimination and that will be a great change in Kiribati (FG1) | You can still give them activities according to their abilities (FG2) |

Both focus groups expressed support for the concept of inclusive education. For example, from focus group 1; 'It's a good idea to give opportunity for those who have been left out or ignored' and from focus group 2; 'It's a good idea because those who are disabled must be included with those who are not.' Teachers in the focus groups also expressed concerns that 'It's hard for the teacher. We don't have much knowledge, especially of the disabled' (FG2). 'We like the idea but we are not qualified. We don't have the knowledge of teaching the disabilities' (FG1).

Discussion

Overall the results were encouraging for the implementation of disability-inclusive education in Kiribati. Teacher attitudes were generally positive. On a practical level there was a developing awareness of

strategies to cater for the needs of students with disabilities. '[We] try to cater for them according to their ability. We have types of ways, different activities' (FG1). In their independent evaluation of the Kiribati Education Improvement Program (KEIP), Smith and McNaughton (2018) note that 'teacher observation data showed teachers were performing well in their approach to inclusive education' (p.54).

There was a contradiction noted in this research between the responses from the two focus groups. Focus Group 1 was very positive towards inclusive education and the teachers were implementing strategies in order to cater for individual learning differences. In Focus Group 2, whilst supportive of inclusive education in principle, the teachers were unsure of how they would implement strategies in their classrooms and anxious about catering for children with disabilities. Focus Group 1 consisted of teachers from a designated model inclusion school for inclusive education which has received extensive support. For Focus Group 2 there had been little input. This has ramifications across Kiribati as schools may need extensive support to successfully implement inclusive education.

Lack of resources was seen as a particular challenge; 'My school will not have adequate special education instructional materials and teaching aids (56% very concerned) and as commented in the focus groups; 'It is also related to the resources of the country because we could not afford what else was needed to provide the resources, wheelchairs, braille, hearing aids, so they can access everything in education. It costs money so that's why they have been neglected. The government fears to buy those things' (FG1). Note that resources for even basic education needs for all students are lacking across Kiribati schools.

Teacher training was also seen as a significant need; 'I do not have the knowledge and skills required to teach children with disabilities (54% very concerned) and from comments in the focus group; 'Teachers are not trained to teach disabilities' (FG1). Teacher training for implementing disability-inclusive education practices is seen as generally lacking across most Kiribati schools. As Smith and McNaughton (2018) state in their evaluation of the Kiribati Education Improvement Program (KEIP) "With the exception of the Model Inclusion School, no teachers interviewed had received any training on how to identify or teach children with a disability" (p. 53).

Le Fanu (2013) argues that under-resourced, untrained and under-paid teachers may be resistant to what they see as further imposition. The education of students with disabilities may be seen as the role of specialists and not the generalist class teacher. There is a well-resourced special school catering for a range of disabilities in the capital Tarawa however until recently no teachers at this school had formal teacher training. Children with disabilities in the outer islands are generally excluded from any schooling.

Funding for inclusive education initiatives has been limited and has mainly been provided through Australian Aid funded programs (Yates, 2019). There were concerns for inclusive education should foreign aid support stop; 'I think that is obvious the change will take a slow pace' (FG1); 'Maybe the program will be stopped' (FG2).

Whilst positive attitudes are encouraging, there can be a gap between supporting in principle and implementation. These attitudes may be a case of intellectual adherence to international (western) principles which have been imposed through (subtle) indoctrination by the Australian Aid funded education project. To paraphrase Freire (1970), the recipients "begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders [donors] and come to see their reality with the outlook [values and attitudes] of the invaders [donors] rather than their own" (p. 134). As commented by a local contractor regarding the influence of Australian Aid funded inclusive education initiatives:

It built our awareness and opened our mind and hearts. We are very grateful that new ideas are introduced to Kiribati because Kiribati is not staying as it is but changed. So how can we cope with changes if we do not have support from others? I think foreign aid ideas are needed for us to go in the right direction

Inclusive education has been given an increased priority at the Ministry of Education level. The Kiribati Education Sector–Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2016–2019 (Kiribati Ministry of Education 2016, p.10) included a major goal: ‘Effective implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy’, as one of nine main goals whereby; ‘This policy will see improved access to and participation in education for many children and young people who cannot access or participate yet in mainstream schools’. Inclusive education is just one of a number of competing priorities for the Kiribati Ministry of Education. Emmott (2014) comments that; ‘MoE is too small and there is too much reform going on to manage more than one new policy at a time’ (p. 29).

The Inclusive Education Policy was not mentioned by any of the participants in the focus groups, who were all classroom teachers. This may indicate a gap between the rhetoric of the policy and awareness of the policy at the school level. Gaps in expectations regarding implementation between the central administration and the school level can mean perceived imposition of programs from above.

Conclusion

Disability-inclusive education is a very new concept for teachers in Kiribati. It is at the school level that the success (or failure) of inclusive education programs will occur. Teachers are the key in demonstrating acceptance (positive attitude) toward students with disabilities. Hard working teachers also have the responsibility to deliver a suitable program to cater for the needs of all students. Teachers will face challenges as students with disabilities are increasingly enrolled in schools. This challenge must be faced with limited resources and training; ‘Inclusive [education] is a challenge. It is challenging teachers’ (FG1). On meeting this challenge; ‘It [inclusive education] is good for them because it makes the teachers work harder to meet the students’ needs. It’s for the kids not the teachers’ (FG1).

Local ownership of disability-inclusive education needs to build from positive attitudes, particularly by teachers. Without attitudes which embrace diversity, teachers may be resentful that inclusion is being imposed ‘from above’ thus producing negative attitudes towards the concept, and perhaps an attitude of not accepting students who presents particular challenges. Teachers are powerful role models. As teachers develop positive attitudes towards student diversity, these attitudes will form the basis of acceptance for future inclusion and sustainability of inclusive values in their schools and ultimately contribute towards changing societal values and attitudes towards a more inclusive society for children and adults with disabilities.

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