

Enhancing the Skills of Rural Teaching Professionals: The Case of Vanuatu

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Abstract

Rural and remote education in the University of the South Pacific's (USP) 12 member countries denote education offered to the bulk of the population in locations such as the inaccessible mountainous terrains, across treacherous rivers and valleys, in the far-flung islands and atolls or even in villages and settlements along the dusty winding roads at the periphery of the urban centers. Rural and remote education in the USP's 12 member countries is still confronted with hosts of formidable challenges even in this globalised-*interneterised* world. The challenges are exacerbated with small economies, a continuous strangle for democracy, lack of prudence, unpredictable tropical weather patterns, and complex and often unnecessary intricate donor demands. The issues of isolation, lack of access, lack of information, lack of training and lack of resources are intricately woven into the fabric of the society of the rural dwellers; often believed to be their God-given portion of grace. Whatever these are rural and remote education in the USP region continues to lag behind profoundly and with it the issue of the continuing imperceptible efforts for this disadvantaged sector of the populous. A number of initiatives in the field of literacy education have successfully been demonstrated in the rural/remote landscapes. The flag for quality teachers and teaching for quality outcomes is just as imperative and mandatory to rural/remote education as to anywhere else. Children or learners in the rural/remote regions deserve the best professionals. They deserve to have the talents and hidden potentials nurtured in the tranquillity of mountainous regions and lush green valleys recognised, tapped, enhanced and developed by the best professionals.

The best professionals are those that are given the opportunities to realise the power of developing the learners' *critical thinking skills*; of problem-solving, exploring issues from their own perspectives, developing evidences to support their views and the skills of applying knowledge to new situations' (Chaffee, 1988). Deficiencies of such skills allude in part or wholly to the learners' reading, writing and literacy skills deficiencies. The development of critical thinking skills enlarges the students' repertoire of knowledge, perceptions of language learning. Experiences in the learners' own world are recognised and developed in more creative ways by the learners. The outcomes displayed attractively in classrooms, or performed in a variety of imaginative ways create vibrant learning environments that stimulate more critical thinking, learning and development. Quality becomes the essence of teaching and learning. Most of all parents see and experience the new changes in their children's attitudes and behaviors to learning and in turn enhance and stimulate the parents' thinking, support, and attitudes to schools, schooling and the system.

Professor Emeritus Warwick Elley an independent evaluator, evaluated the schools in 2003 (Pre- tests) and post-tests were carried out in 2005 and 2007. The classes involved were Classes 4 (9 year olds) and 6 (11 year olds). In 2003 after the dismal pre-test results the schools carried out VANLEP. The post-test results of 2005 (Elley 2005) showed significant gains of 10% for VANLEP Classes. Two years later in 2007 another survey of the same cohorts was carried out in Classes 4 and 6. The Class 6 pupils were the Class 4 that began at the end of 2003 and Class 4 were the Class 3 s that began in 2006. The survey report stated (Elley, 2007 pg17) 'In Year 4, the 15 classes that had the full benefit of the VANLEP Book Flood for at least a year produced a gain of 8.3% while the non-VANLEP classes declined by 2.0%. In other words, the VANLEP classes improved just over 10% more than the remaining classes. The gains were spread over the four skills tested – Word recognition, Sentence Comprehension, Vocabulary and Listening Comprehension'. According to Elley 'the improvements shown by the VANLEP classes were very encouraging and demonstrated that the 10% gains shown in the 2005 evaluation of the first 20 schools had been sustained during the following two years when VANLEP was expanded to over 100 schools (2007). Elley emphasises: 'This is clearly a project that makes a difference'.

Keywords:

Keyword 1: rural-remote
Keyword 2: critical thinking
Keyword 3: quality

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the evaluated practices (Elley, 2005, 2007) in the Vanuatu Literacy Education Programme (VANLEP) a Project carried out in the years 2005 – 2007 and funded by the New Zealand International Aid Assistance Programme via New Zealand's social sector development agency; Polytechnic Institute of New Zealand (PINZ). The paper first briefly discusses rural and remote education in the University of the South Pacific (USP) region; secondly it looks at the VANLEP practices and their impact on the learners and teaching and finally a concluding remark.

VANLEP was a Project for the rural and remote schools of Vanuatu formerly the New Hebrides, which is a Y-shaped archipelago of 83 islands, located about 1,750 kilometers east of Australia while Fiji lies to the east, New Caledonia to the south and the Solomon Islands northwest. Vanuatu has a land area of 11,830 sq km (4,568 sq miles). Vanuatu is mostly mountainous terrains of volcanic origin and with narrow coastal plains. It experiences tropical and subtropical weather patterns. The people are *ni-Vanuatu* of Melanesian descent. The population (2007 est.) is 218,000 with 94% ni-Vanuatu, 4% Europeans, 2% other Pacific Islanders and Asians. About 33,700 live in the capital Port Vila, 10,700 live in Luganville town on Espiritu Santo and the remainder of the people, approximately 173, 600 live as rural and remote dwellers.

Primary enrollment is 100% which sharply decreases to 20% in secondary and upper secondary.

Vanuatu's economy is primarily agricultural with 80% of the population engaging in agricultural activities that range from subsistence farming to smallholder farming of coconuts and other cash crops. Copra is the biggest income earner making up more than 35% of the country's exports followed by timber, beef and cocoa.

2. RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION IN THE USP REGION DEMAND QUALITY

Rural and remote education in the USP region demand quality. This implies that rural and remote education in this region demand access to quality education and access to equal opportunity to quality education. Quality education empowers people with quality knowledge and skills for individual and collective informed decisions on issues that continually confront them. Quality education also equips people the intellectual freedom to actively and responsibly participate in reforms that change their lives for a brighter future. Quality education is the foundation for better living. Quality education is a weapon for rural and remote dwellers who are incessantly plagued with poverty and hardship.

The profound equity gaps that still haunt the rural and remote people despite the numerous attempts over the years to bridge these need pragmatic solutions that need to come only from the people concerned. It seems that the strategies of practices within these attempts have unfortunately widened the gaps because solutions for better living are perpetually decided by decision makers with minimal know-how of the real and dying circumstances faced by rural and remote dwellers and heavy reliance on mostly unreasonable donor-driven objectives and timing. Importantly also in terms of global comparisons, rural and remote education in these small island states does seem insignificant because of the 'small number' involved in relation to the almost incalculable numbers of the bigger underdeveloped countries. Funding implications do have a great deal of impact on development as bigger numbers take the cake.

3. QUALITY TEACHERS AND TEACHING IS THE CORNERSTONE TO QUALITY LEARNING

Quality education implies quality teachers and quality teachers are professionals that are richly equipped with knowledge, skills and pragmatic solutions for their clientele. VANLEP enriched the skills of teachers of the rural and remote schools of Vanuatu; from the schools of the TORBA Province in the North to the schools of TAFEA Province in the south of the archipelago. Teacher development was most significant as teachers make the difference in children; in their learning, in their outlook, in their behaviour, in their self determination, self esteem and self worth. Teachers are the key.

4. QUALITY TEACHERS ARE PROFESSIONALLY EMPOWERED TEACHERS

Teachers become professionally empowered when they understand how to make learning happen naturally without the learners' fear of being labeled and segregated into a 'slow group' or 'red group'. Professionally empowered teachers make children ask questions, discuss and share work and experiences, reason and reflect, analyse and be critical and above all make children enjoy the wonders of learning

5. DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Teaching in the USP member countries is mostly exam-oriented. The teacher delivers facts and uses various ways of getting learners memorise the facts for examination purposes as teachers and schools are judged the 'best' through the numbers of children that get through in internal and external examinations.. This is facilitating rote learning. It is 'lower order' learning (Paul, 1992:4). According to Paul this 'undisciplined, associative, and inert' learning hinders educational process. Teachers must be professionally able to go beyond these narrow learning strategies and encourage learners to participate in the learning process

Chaffee (1988: 3) defines critical thinking as 'our active, purposeful, organised efforts to make sense of the world and making sense of our world by carefully examining our thinking (and the thinking of others) in order to clarify and improve our understanding'. Scriven and Paul, 1987) define critical thinking as 'actively and skillfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication, as a guide to belief and action'. Paul and Elder (2008) also support this thinking. The table of development in appendix 1 depicts the kind of development utilised in VANLEP.

6. MONITORING PROGRESS

Teachers need to be given constructive feedbacks on their work. Training the trainers for effective observation and monitoring was also undertaken and so effective observation and monitoring were carried out in all Zones. This component of professional empowerment was conducted by a New Zealand literacy specialist, Murray Gadd.

7. SCHOOL VISITS, ATTACHMENTS, ZONE MEETINGS

School visits, attachments and zone meetings for more empowerment were part of enhancing the skills of the rural teachers. These contacts created confident, reflective, enthusiastic and committed teachers and dismantled the boxed ideas about them and the impacts of rural remote locations on them.

8. EVALUATION

8.1 The 2007 Survey

Table 1: Mean Scores (2003 & 2007) and Gains for VANLEP and Non-VANLEP Classes

VANLEP CLASSES				NON_VANLEP CLASSES			
School	2003	2007	Gain	School	2003	2007	Gain
V	12.6	29.3	16.7	S	29.2	27.6	-1.6
McK	24.6	27.4	2.8	T	25.0	26.0	1.0
La	24.0	21.1	-2.9	SE	26.5	28.3	1.8
Am	16.8	24.7	7.9	K	23.4	20.6	-2.8
Li	21.1	18.4	-2.7	Eb	18.4	16.4	-2.0
Ta	22.2	24.7	2.5	Y	16.9	18.4	1.5
F	19.5	26.6	7.1	H	21.8	21.0	-0.8
Er	19.4	24.0	4.6	N	20.2	22.4	2.2
P	22.5	22.8	0.3	A	25.2	25.6	0.4
M	23.1	20.2	-2.9	W	24.3	18.6	-5.7
El	20.4	20.4	0.0	N	17.2	17.8	0.6
I	25.5	25.6	0.2	VN	24.2	24.7	0.5
Le	22.4	27.6	5.2	El	20.7	16.1	-4.6
Lam	16.8	22.0	5.2	Ek	13.7	16.7	3.0
Lo	18.6	24.1	5.5	Lau	20.6	17.0	-3.6
MEANS	20.6	23.9	3.3		21.6	20.8	-0.81
MEAN %	51.5%	59.8%	8.3%		54.0%	52.0%	-2.0%

(Elley 2007, pg 10)

According to Elley, 'all except 3 of the VANLEP schools produced positive gain compared with the 2003 cohorts at the same level and six of these gains were over 5 raw scores points or 12.5%. The overall gain was 3.3 points or 8.3% a substantial improvement over the 2003 performance levels of these schools. Several schools showed huge gains. These were taught by teachers who had enthusiastically adopted the spirit of VANLEP and provided a good learning environment for improving their pupils' English.

8.2 Urban – Rural Differences

Again Elley states that the 2007 survey followed the 2003 classifications of schools into large towns (over 10,000 people), small towns, villages and small or remote villages. The same criteria were used in both surveys 2003 and 2007. In 2003 the mean scores for the towns were higher than those for the village schools and the same pattern was found.

Table 2

Mean Scores for Urban-Rural in Years 6 and 4 2003 and 2007

	YEAR 6			YEAR 4		
	Mean 2003	Mean 2007	Change %	Mean 2003	Mean 2007	Change %
Large town	26.4	25.4	-1.0(-3%)	23.8	24.9	1.1% (2.8%)
Small Town	25.3	25.1	-0.2(-0.1%)	23.4	23.8	0.159(1.0%)
Village	22.6	22.9	0.3(0.8%)	20.1	21.7	1.6 (4.0%)
Small Village	20.7	21.7	1.3(3%)	18.0	18.3	0.3(0.8%)

Elley states that Table 2 shows the means for Year 6 and depicts a reduction in the Urban Rural gaps. The means for the town schools declined while those for the village schools improved. For Year 4 pupils the scores improved in all categories **but they gained the most in village schools (4%). This improvement appears to reflect the influence of VANLEP in rural schools** (Elley, 2007 pg 13).

9. PARENTS MATTER

As VANLEP progressed it was clear that parental support was needed for a complete holistic development. Parental support workshops were conducted and a great number of parents attended which also included looking around the 'new look' classroom environments and observing lessons by the consultant/tutor. A parents' resource book which was translated to Bislama by the Trainers and published by the Institute of Education at USP was distributed. Project teachers used the book and their experiences in the Project to discuss issues with the parents.

7. CONCLUSION

Quality development is removing inequities.

- VANLEP development was a radical reform in teaching and learning.
- VANLEP development showed that professionally empowered teachers do make a difference.
- VANLEP development showed that rural children are equally capable of producing better outcomes with professionally empowered teachers.
- VANLEP development showed that parents, teachers and schools need each other for quality development.
- VANLEP development showed that a system that perpetuates the idea of providing better learning for a section of students and denying a greater section particularly those in rural and remote communities can be easily demolished.
- VANLEP development showed that inequities can be dismantled by professionally empowered teachers.

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Appendices
Appendix 1

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT TECHNIQUE
A Proven South Pacific Initiative

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6
Rhymes	Songs	Poems	Rhymes	Songs	Poems
Shared Reading (SBE)	SBE: Review	Shared Writing (SW)	Publishing	Language Learning	Further Learning
<p>INTRODUCTION A. Title Introduce cover: text/title/headline, writer, illustrator B. Predict content C. First Reading – right pace – read without stopping for explanation D. 2nd Reading – Read and discuss – events, characters, plot etc E. 3rd Reading – Class join in if can – apply story to own experience</p>	<p>SBE: REVIEW A. recall B. retell C. review – discuss – setting events, plot sequence, characters, D. drama – role play – whole class with teacher or in groups or pairs E. re-read story – more discussion F. relate story to own experience</p>	<p>SHARED WRITING 1. Whole Class with Teacher A. Choose similar title B. Plan C. Write Draft D. Edit E. Re-write Draft F. Proof Read G. Final Draft 2. Group Story Follow procedures above with teacher facilitating process</p>	<p>PUBLISH STORY 1. Formats: Big Book, origami, concertina, poster, small book 2. Layout: portrait, landscape 3. Design – decide on design of inner pages and layout 4. Illustrating 5. Share work</p>	<p>LANGUAGE LEARNING: structure, syntax 1. LANGUAGE GAMES vocab, tenses, phonics, sounds, spelling pronunciation etc 2. LANGUAGE WRITTEN ACTIVITIES - cloze multiple choice questions matching etc</p>	<p>OTHER LEARNING 1. Free reading 2. Free Writing 3. Creative Writing – Turning stories into poems, songs – dances, choreographed etc 4. Organise visits to and from Organise Parents Day</p>
OUTCOMES: SKILLS DEVELOPED:	OUTCOMES: SKILLS DEVELOPED	OUTCOMES: SKILLS DEVELOPED	OUTCOMES: SKILLS DEVELOPED	OUTCOMES: SKILLS DEVELOPED	OUTCOMES: SKILLS DEVELOPED
<p>predictions reasoning reflection opinions, views discussions sharing selecting confirming contributing brainstorming application analysing synthesising</p>	<p>reasoning retelling recalling views opinions reflection discussion sharing collaborating application analysing synthesising</p>	<p>Writing Process – Title selection, plan, draft, edit, proof reading, final draft Discussions- brainstorming, reasoning, reflection, application, synthesising, analysing co-operating collaborating sharing giving views and opinions accepting each other's work and ideas – reasoning views</p>	<p>Publishing skills – Formatting, layout, designing, illustrating Thinking – reasoning, reflecting, opinion, views, discussion, sharing, co-operating, collaborating</p>	<p>Better speaker, writer, reader in English (or Language in use) reasoning reflection opinion giving sharing selecting sampling confirming discussion sharing brainstorming</p>	<p>Further expression – Using English in various genres. Skills – independence, responsibility, maturity, organisation, co-operation, collaboration reasoning reflection discussion sharing analysing application synthesising</p>