

The Workbook –is it still effective?

Akhila Nand Sharma

Introduction

A great deal of attention is now being focused on the professional duties of teachers, especially those duties associated with careful and detailed planning of teaching and learning. Teachers in Fiji have been preparing and using workbooks as a detailed plan of teaching and learning for a long time. A literature survey, however, suggests that there is very little information on the effectiveness of workbooks. This paper attempts to fulfill this need by discussing the findings of a research study that looked at the effectiveness of workbooks in teaching and learning in a primary school in Fiji.

The workbook, what it should be

According to Kellough and Kellough (1999) the detailed planning for teaching and learning is carried out for several reasons, but the most important one is to ensure curriculum coherence. The workbook, in particular, serves as an agenda for the teacher, a helpful aid for substitute teachers and a useful record for use in the future when teaching similar lessons and classes. Further, it provides information on the quality of teaching and learning, and what the teacher and students could do to improve the standard of their performance. Barry and King (1997) take the discussion a step further and explain that the keeping of a workbook is an administrative requirement. It shows the coverage of work relative to similar classes at both school and national levels. With this information, the educational administrators such as head teachers are able to assess the work of the teacher as well as that of the students and suggest ways of reinforcing the strengths and addressing the limitations.

According to Richard et al. (1991), effective planning at the school level begins with curriculum development and passes through the scheme of work and units of work to the weekly workbook and daily lesson plans. Similarly, Dodd (1970) explains that there are three main elements in the process of preparation. First, there is the syllabus, which tells the teacher, in broad outline, what aspects of its subject are to be covered annually. Second, there is the scheme of work, which is the detailed version of the syllabus and addresses the specific needs of a class and the school community. The third element is the lesson plan that shows clearly how the lesson is to be taken in the time prescribed by the school timetable. These three elements, according to Dodd, integrate and interrelate to ensure that there is continuity in the teacher's teaching and the child's learning.

In preparing and presenting lessons, it is also important for the teacher to include the approaches suggested by Bloom (1956) and Habermas (1972 in Smith and Lovat, 1990). Bloom talks about three categories of learning: cognitive, psychomotor and affective. The cognitive learning is concerned with intellectual processes, psychomotor with the development of physical movements and the affective with the development of attitudes, values, beliefs, interests and social relationships. These categories of learning help the teacher determine behavioural and non-behavioural objectives and the learning experiences to attain them.

Habermas (1972 in Smith and Lovat, 1990) offers another explanation for the apparent divisions in what is the unity of knowledge. He suggests that they arise as a result of human 'cognitive interests'. These interests are threefold. First, is 'technical knowing', which relates to an 'empirical-analytic' type of knowledge. The teacher here is concerned mainly

with helping the students learn the 'facts and figures' associated with the subject or the topic being discussed. Second, there is an interest in understanding meanings that relate to an 'historical-hermeneutic' type of knowledge. At this phase of learning, the students are assisted to ascertain what events mean to people and the context through the negotiation of meanings. The third way of knowing eventuates through critical and inquiry-based learning exercises. At this stage, the students begin to ask whether the knowledge they have acquired is reliable or not. This they do by inquiring, discovering, scrutinizing and appraising. In the classroom, inquiry-based learning approaches, such as case studies and research projects, contribute significantly to this way of learning.

In brief, then, Habermas' three 'ways of knowing' can be employed in any subject or lesson. The teacher's input in the beginning can be seen as technical knowing. In this phase of the lesson, teachers provide information on the new concepts and ideas that they intend to develop. In the second part of the lesson, teachers provide opportunities for group discussion in which students collectively explore the concepts and ideas further. In the final step of the lesson, teachers provide tasks that involve critical review of the materials developed. In this case, they are involved in inquiry-based learning.

The Study

This study adopted the qualitative research approach. This approach became necessary because I wanted to understand the effectiveness of the workbook in teaching and learning from the perspectives of teachers. This warranted in-depth and descriptive data and, therefore, it was not possible to select many schools for the study in the limited time and resources made available. Thus, the case-study approach was considered appropriate and a primary school was selected for the study. With

this approach, I was aware that the findings of the study cannot be generalised to all schools. However, I spoke to teachers from other schools and found that the findings of this study are not significantly different from what happens there.

The data-gathering methods included interviews with teachers, documentary analysis of workbooks and other planning and preparation documents, observation of lessons and corridor conversation. These methods facilitated the triangulation of data and the collection of descriptive data that helped me to understand the effectiveness of the workbook from the perspectives of the teachers.

The case study school is a large primary school and is located in Lautoka. It is a coeducational school and has a multiracial student population of about 600. Besides the head teachers and two assistant head teachers, it has 14 assistant teachers and one pre-school teacher.

All the teachers willingly participated in the study after they were provided with the necessary information and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings and discussion

The overall picture from the research findings is that workbook preparation in the case study school is seen largely as an administrative task and not as an important activity of the teaching learning process. Other purposes listed are:

- ❖ it serves as a guide on what to teach and in case the class teacher is absent, someone else can follow the Workbook and teach the class.
- ❖ It helps to keep us on track and when supervisors come to observe lessons they check the amount of work covered.

Student teachers acquired knowledge and skills in writing the workbook from their associate teachers while they were

on their practice teaching in schools. Their perception of the workbook, therefore, was influenced by the importance their associate teachers gave to it and format they used for preparing it.

The more experienced teachers saw the preparation of a workbook as an unnecessary exercise and a useless administrative requirement and they did not consult the workbook while they presented their lessons. However, data from lessons observed show that these teachers employed teacher-centred approaches that included lectures, teacher questions and student answers, and paper and pencil tests. Obviously, they did not understand the rationale behind long and short term planning and inquiry-based learning.

On the other hand, the younger teachers and those who were pursuing further studies at the University of the South Pacific used the workbook effectively while teaching. They spent a lot of time in preparing it carefully. Owing to limited space in the standard workbook, however, they were not able provide sufficient information. Their workbook entries included various aspects of the lesson, such as the topic, learning objectives, learning experiences, teaching aids, and evaluation tasks. Some of these younger teachers also prepared detailed lesson plans to complement the brief workbook entries.

Surprisingly, the assistant teachers and the head teacher who signed and countersigned the workbooks did not make any comments in this regard. Occasionally they wrote remarks such as 'neatly prepared', 'keep it up', 'good' and 'excellent'. They did not, however, make any constructive comments on how to improve the quality of preparation and teaching and learning. It is argued, therefore, that even the educational administrators did not attribute any importance to workbooks in teaching and learning. For them, the workbook was an administrative requirement and all teachers had to prepare it in advance.

They also explained that some teachers did not prepare the workbook in advance and did not provide enough information. They also felt that the materials provided by the CDU were more useful for teaching. The head teacher agreed that "teachers are forced to write a workbook because the officials of the Ministry Education want it that way. I have to see that it is prepared in advance and has sufficient information".

Most workbooks in the case study school contained merely the listing of subjects, topics and sub topics and the page numbers of the prescribed texts. The key elements, such as learning objectives, learning experiences, resources, evaluation and remediation were not included. Therefore, the workbooks did not provide sufficient information for teachers or substitute teachers to take their lessons effectively.

It was also found that some teachers were reproducing their previous year's workbook because they were teaching the same classes year in and year out. According to the teachers, what mattered most to their head teacher and assistant head teachers was neatly filled in grids for the week. One teacher wrote: I take my previous year's workbook home and my son copies the content in this year's workbook.

Some teachers said that they prepared the workbook, but they hardly ever used it. The teachers in the school depended largely on the teacher's and pupils' handbooks provided by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of the Ministry of Education, and they used the scheme of work, which had information on themes, concepts, skills, processes, values and attitudes of the curriculum subject areas that they were managing.

With the current format of the workbook, it is difficult for teachers to make appropriate entries as suggested by Barry and King (1997) earlier. One of the key limitations of the workbook, as stated by the teachers, is that the grids in the workbook do not provide sufficient

space for detailed preparation. Thus the workbook provides very little information about actual teaching and learning. It was seen that teachers merely write the subject, period number, the topic and the page numbers of the prescribed textbooks.

The open workbook

The pre-school teacher in this school used the workbook effectively. She used it as an 'open book'. She prepared the work of a day in the space of the workbook that was traditionally allocated for a week. The workbook grids were modified to provide detailed information on the subject to be taught, concepts/themes to be developed, learning objectives, values, attitudes and skills to be developed, lesson procedures and the resources to be used.

The open workbook was developed as teaching and learning progressed. In other words, teaching and learning began with sufficient information on the above mentioned headings. There was space left in each column to enter more information during and after the lesson. The teacher explained:

In the open workbook, I am able to focus my preparation on the learning abilities of the children in my class. I have a 'focus group' for a day and sometimes a week. At this early stage, the group may need extra assistance in a particular subject or in socialization. When the children's learning needs are discovered during the teaching learning process, they are recorded in the workbook for immediate as well as future actions. The workbook is, therefore, developed as teaching and learning unfolds.

It was noticed that the workbook comprised information on class organisation as well. In particular, it had the school timetable, the important school rules, the class list and lists of groups, and records such as fund raising,

notes on student behaviour and progress. The teacher allocated a section of the workbook to journal or diary keeping. It was cumulatively kept up to date and showed the main events of the class and the school. It even had information on important current affairs, including sports and politics.

Although this open workbook was used effectively in a pre-school class, it offers useful lessons for improving the quality of the workbook in our primary and secondary schools.

Conclusion

Over the years, the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) has advocated numerous changes through the new texts, subjects, teaching and learning strategies and evaluation approaches. It has, however, made little effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In particular, the preparation of workbooks and other aspects of teaching and learning have not improved very much. As the study shows, the preparation of the workbook is an administrative requirement and not necessarily a meaningful exercise for effective teaching and learning. Teachers largely teach from the teacher and pupils' handbooks and other texts provided by CDU. I wish to stress that the resources provided by CDU are just a guide to the teacher and not 'ready-to-teach' materials.

Writers such as Barry and King (1997) assert that purposeful, efficient and effective learning hinges on sound planning and preparation of lessons. In the light of this study, it is strongly suggested that the purpose and the design of the workbook and corresponding planning and preparation activities be examined carefully.

I wish to conclude this report with four suggestions. The first relate to pre-service teacher training programmes. Besides lesson plans and the scheme of work, student- teachers should be given training in workbook preparation.

The second concerns school-based professional development programmes. In collaboration with CDU, head teachers should organise ongoing staff programmes on topics relating to planning and preparation of lessons, of which workbook preparation should take an important place.

Thirdly, the purpose and format of the workbook need to be reconsidered. The workbook can take many formats. Most schools in Fiji, however, have a standard format that utilizes commercially printed workbooks with appropriate headings. Other formats include loose-leaf folders and exercise books.

I was impressed by the open workbook used in the case study school and would like to suggest an improved version of it. I suggest that the entries for a subject in the workbook be made under the following headings:

- ❖ the subject and topic to be taught;
- ❖ the learning objectives (concepts/themes, values and attitudes to be developed);
- ❖ the learning experiences (content, teaching methods and evaluation approaches);
- ❖ the resources to be used;
- ❖ self-reflection; and
- ❖ homework .

The workbook can be developed as teaching and learning progresses. In other words, teaching and learning should begin with sufficient information on the above mentioned headings. Then, more information should be entered during and after the lesson. The open workbook ought to be 'learner focussed'. This focus will allow teachers to address the needs of gifted as well as slow learners. The learning objectives should reflect Blooms taxonomy and the learning experiences based on Habermas' three ways of knowing. Moreover, the workbook

preparation should also incorporate the concepts of 'mastery learning' and 'formative evaluation'.

As regards the format of the workbook entry, I would like to suggest that it be prepared for the whole week on a subject basis, rather than in chronological order as the subjects appear on the class timetable. i.e. with all the information for one subject in a particular class, eg Maths Class 3G, given together.

I conclude with these words of Borke and Niles (1987:167), "To teach successfully, one must plan successfully".

References

- Barry, K. and L. King**, (2nd Edit.) (1997) *Beginning teaching and beyond* Australia: Social Science Press.
- Bloom, B. S.** (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objective: the classification of educational goals. Handbook 1 Cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay.
- Borko, H. and J. Niles** (1987) "Descriptions of teacher planning Ideas for teachers and researchers". In Richardson Koehler (ed.) *Educator's handbook: A research perspective*. New York: Longman. Pages 167-187.
- Dodd, W. A.** (ed.) *The Teacher at Work*. London: Oxford University Press. Pages 32-41.
- Kellough, R. and N. Kellough** (1999) *A Guide to Methods and Resources*. Ohio: Prentice Hall.
- Richard, K. and W. Williams, and I. Margaret** (1991) *Dynamics of Effective Teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Smith, D. L. and T. J. Lovat** (1990) *Curriculum action on reflection* Australia: Social Science Press.

