**Ronald Ravinesh Lal**

**Date of Interview: 31 August 2021**

**​​**

​​

06:32

Hello. So, we will begin with the interview. Okay,

06:36

I just need to inform you that the interview is being recorded for the purpose of data analysis and the confidentiality of this interview will be maintained. So, can we begin by first understanding your designation and the name of your organization?

06:57

Okay, I work for free teachers union as a finance and administration officer. Okay. Okay.

07:07

And what are the roles and responsibilities that you have to that are included in this?

07:17

Mostly, I look after the finance side of the operations. Okay. And in general operations of the office. Okay. Okay. Okay.

07:30

What is the number of years of experience that you have?

07:35

I've been there for the past 12 years, that is, this is the 13th year going. Okay. Okay.

07:40

And are you a teacher before this? No, no. Okay. So, is it your first job or are you doing something else before coming into this position?

07:54

I initially I was part of the tourism industry. Okay. And then I joined the union in 2008.

08:05

So I am also involved with fundraising of the Union.

08:14

Normally we do not carry out fundraising. We normally we get donations from donor agencies. Okay. And most of the funding that is that we get is from our own funds. We have set up our fund where the union contributes towards it from there, then we use those funds for activities, various activities.

08:42

Okay. So are they did the schools in your area closed? During the pandemic?

08:50

Yes, all the schools were closed during the pandemic.

08:53

Okay. Can you tell me the duration from when till when the schools were closed?

09:01

I don't have a specific date. But about two months, the schools were closed March and April 2020. late March to early May, towards the end of May.

09:19

And after that the schools restarted

09:22

not for students but only the teachers will ask to just go prepare worksheets for the students to distribution.

09:35

Okay. And all the students have not been coming to school since March 2020. Until now. Yes, yeah,

09:45

they're, they're all been asked to stay away from school until we really do not have a timeline given when the schools will resume for students.

10:01

Okay, what was the mode of teaching adopted by schools during the pandemic?

10:10

For the first two months, there was no teaching or learning going on. In the later part, then the government announced that teachers need to actually go to schools, and then prepare worksheets and learning materials for students. We have parents who are asked to come and collect it from the school heads, on a weekly basis. So normally, one week's worksheet is taken, the students parents are responsible for getting it answered. And then they it's returned to the Head of School for marking. So it is been practiced right now.

11:04

Yeah. So I was asking that worksheet is something that children do after knowing the introduction of the concept. So how was the concept introduced? How was the lesson delivered?

11:23

Not really, there was no lessons delivered. It was worksheets received by parents, the students, mostly revision, or remedial work of these already taught at school. Whatever they are receiving is actually they had been taught earlier during the before the closure of the schools. No new lesson has been introduced so far,

11:53

for the entire year.

11:56

Yeah, till now, we don't see any new curriculum, but there is a curriculum being set up, but due to the lack of technology, lack of technology of the rural schools, so the teachers are not able to get in contact with the all the students because of communication problems.

12:20

Okay. So is it that that some students are coming for online classes, and many are not coming?

12:29

Yes, because normally the online classes are conducted through this, apps like zoom. And not all students have access to smartphones or laptops where they can access to these provisions or wherever.

12:48

So has there been any, any initiatives taken by the government or the union to deal with this situation?

12:59

Recently, the union through its credit arm, the social benefit arm is introduced a loan. There is no conditions to get loan for 1000 dollars for teacher members to withdraw, take loan and provide for the technologies they need, like electronic gadgets they need to teach to provide students. In terms of government's point of view, we haven't seen any developments from the government, we're providing students with gadgets where they can easily access the online teaching facilities.

13:47

And what about government support for teachers, has the government supported in any way.

13:55

Government has provided all the facilities to the teachers, but not like in the city areas or towns and cities, they have these facilities, rural areas, they have these internet connectivity problems and the resources to prepare for their students. And mostly, the government at this point in time, is just getting teachers to schools to prepare options. Other than that, this is the point of view of the students. There's nothing been done so far.

14:34

Okay. Okay. Was there a transition in the mode of teaching during the pandemic? So, the question is basically trying to understand how exactly a teaching was being done. And now that you're saying that no new teaching was being done. I want to understand if this was a, like a nationwide phenomena or was it Was there differences between the rural and the urban areas.

15:04

yes, there are differences. Some teachers took initiative on their selves to conduct classes online for students who had access to these smartphones, so not all of them were affected. Just those ones that don't have access to this technology at this point.

15:24

So in these particular zoom classes, what was teacher teaching new concepts or the old concepts,

15:32

those those that will bring online, the new concepts will be taught according to the curriculum introduced by the government

15:42

who all were involved in taking this decision of moving to online mode.

15:51

It was an initiative of the teacher as well as the school's management. Well, , they, if they have resources, then they would have done this online classes. But mostly, it was ,some of my teacher friends, they have taken this initiative themselves and introduce the teaching to students, especially to the classes the teacher.

16:19

Okay, and what was the government position? What What was the government response to the scenario

16:28

the government supported the initative by these teachers, but only thing is that not all are in line with the new curriculum, some students get the benefit of getting taught the new, the new lessons, while others are still where they left off.

16:54

So what I'm understanding from your responses that as the COVID started, and the schools were shut, it was the teachers and the school management initiative to start online classes and government supported the decision made by the teachers and the school management.

17:16

Yes,whatever decisions are taken by the teachersis with the consultation with the education ministry. Okay. So, that approval must have been given by the education ministry to go ahead with these classes, then this step was taken,

17:36

okay. So, how was this approval taken? Who took this approval?

17:44

I am not too familiar, but the normal process is the head of schools are responsible for getting approvals from the Ministry. Once that is given them the implement whatever they propose,

17:59

does the union has any role in this consultation?

18:07

The union is not been consulted on this thing so far. We will have been completely shut out of these discussions in terms of how we can facilitate the teaching of students only we voiced our concerns was during the initial stages when the teachers were required to prepare worksheets and physically hand over to parents. So where we raised our concerns that there is physical contact with and there's a high chance of spreading of virus in the community.

18:55

In what what has been the experience of teachers in transitioning to online mode of teaching.

19:01

Most teachers that are have those teachers who are familiar with the modern technology, they are able to adapt, when it when you look at physical contact and online teaching and those teachers who do not have this resources, they are finding it difficult to carry out this requirement provided by the Ministry.

19:38

Okay, okay. Do you think there have been differences in the way male and female teachers have responded to the situation?

19:48

There could be because once the schools closed, female teachers and normally other roles in especially when they are at home They look after kids in hpusehold. So there is a possibility that male and female teachers respond to the these requirements and adapting to these changes.

20:21

Do you think there have been differences in the way private schools and government school teachers have responded to the situation?

20:34

Private schools are mostly well equipped with the resources they have. They would have responded well, to the regards to the government provided the facilities, not all of them have access to this

20:49

access to the digital platforms. In what ways do you think the pandemic has impacted teachers work and their working conditions?

21:03

Well, one of factor is that now they're working from home. And initially, they were working from home and then now they are required to travel to schools, where there are a lot of restrictions being imposed. In terms of meeting people, there's been some jurisdictions impose intervening in public transport, and requirements set up by the government's having, as we call it care Fiji app. So getting access to all the resources, and then you have to set up, especially the head of schools who are required to set up this environment where when parents visit, they follow these protocols before they send it over the worksheets. Okay.

22:12

So in terms of teachers work, what I'm understanding from your responses, teachers work has increased when they have returned to school, and they have to manage and maintain the COVID protocols and work within that.

22:31

Not to that extent, they normally when they are in school, then they're engaged with the students while they are away from school. Normally, they are required to carry out these activities online mostly. And those who are well versed with technology, then there is easier for them, those who are not there is a difficulty. They need product for these changes. Okay.

23:07

What are the new digital technologies that have been introduced in your school system during the pandemic?

23:15

mostly use of mobile phones and laptops to carry out this teaching the curriculum. Okay,

23:25

which platforms? So for example, you said zoom is being used for classes? What are the other applications that have been used?

23:37

To my knowledge, I'm only aware of zoom, but there are other apps available, but I'm really not aware that the teachers are using those.

23:51

Do you think teachers had access to a personal device or gadget and internet connectivity that was required for doing their work?

24:03

Not all of them. those teachers especially those in the towns and cities had the proper good internet country, those in the rural areas do not have this facilities available. So they would have faced these difficulties definitely.

24:30

urban and rural. Okay. Do you think there were also any differences between the access that male and female teachers have

24:40

they faced similar difficulties. Not whether male or female , is the resources that are available for them to provide the required teaching.

24:57

what challenges are teachers faced in using the devices.

25:07

Mostly those teachers did not have these resources they would have definitely had to purchase on their own expense to facilitate these requirements. And some will have done on the initiative to purchase and provide for the students the teaching required to then cover the curriculum.

25:29

And what about access to internet?

25:34

They face any challenges, especially those areas where limited connectivity. Otherwise, most places here have internet available apart from remote areas.

25:52

Okay, so for their internet monthly internet connection was any money given by the government or teachers had to pay from their own pockets?

26:04

teachers who were provided but only if they did this act from school facility. And in the recent budget, the government also announced for students a $20 those who have access to internet to purchase mobile data.

26:34

all students across the nation?

26:41

Yes, yes. Is it possible to get this get more information on this? Can you suggest any document that we can read for understanding this?

26:55

Oh, it was announced in the national budget. You will have the information available on the Ministry of Economy website. The national budget address for 2021 2022 Okay. Okay.

27:22

Can you suggest any popular newspaper that we can look at?

27:34

The two newspapers we have Fiji time , and the Fiji sun?

27:54

 Has the union provided any trainings to teachers during the pandemic?

28:01

No, no, not at the moment because of the COVID restrictions we are not allowed to gather to carry out any training or thing as such. So at this point in time, we haven't done anything

28:14

okay. And no webinars as well. Okay, okay. Okay, what are the ways in which teachers work have changed compared to the pre pandemic period

28:35

mostly , I would say from physical contact with students where there are normally classroom based teaching all done now mostly these online being facilitated for students.

28:51

So what implications does it have on it on the nature of work and the time that they have to invest?

29:01

it mostly now the teaching and learning is done at a convenient time to students and teachers. So it's not during the normally where we have a full workday where teachers used to go to school and teach Now, some of these learning is taking after hours during the six where these mostly good connectivity or internet then teachers actually get in touch with their students online to teach.

29:41

What are the current major concerns of teachers with regard to their work?

29:49

Mostly, I would say ,when there are In classroom they are able to disseminate more information to the students as a group, while on an individual basis or small group of students joining online then these you know, the coverage of this, what do you call the syllabus is not for all students. And I mean, getting all the information required to students may not be possible online. For example, I would say use of Blackboard where teachers use blackboards to a whiteboard to explain a concept. But online for teachers, they could use this carry out this explanations but like for students, some students may not be able to do that, because of the understanding and the knowledge required to carry out this especially for primary school students.

31:06

So that is a concern that concern that teachers have. Are there any specific factors that have caused stress amongst teachers?

31:22

Basically, now, they are doing work from home, where they have very limited resources available at home to carry out this teaching requirements, especially when they are at schools they have resources for them to use and prepare well, for the students but at home while they are working from home not all resources are available for them. There will be a difficulty for them to prepare well. Or more informative curriculum .

32:04

Whom does the teachers reach out to for support.

32:10

Well, in terms of teaching requirements they are normally the ministry is required to cater for their needs. In terms of their work related or the contract, and the union is there for them.

32:28

Sorry, I missed your last sentence in terms of the work related

32:32

 work conditions, if they're not happy, then the union is there to step in for them to help negotiate with the employers. Okay,

32:42

okay. So what kind of issues have you have teachers raised during the during the last year? Like if some teachers have approached the union? What kind of issues have they come up with?

32:56

Mostly, two major ones were the coming in contact with the parent during the COVID crisis. And they raised concern that they did not want to be in contact with parents, especially with sending out the worksheets where there's a high chance of spreading of this disease. And the second one was the the government introduced this law where all civil servants were required to get the vaccination done. So there were two jabs required. The government announced that if the teachers did not get the job, they can't actually teach they can they will lose their job. So, those are the concerns raised by the teachers with their union.

33:51

So, there are a set of teachers who do not want to take the vaccination Yes, yes, but the union is that in the national interest, that we should all take the two jabs required okay.

34:10

And what is the reason for these teachers do not take the take the vaccination,

34:19

most of them and the person have actually gone onto social media reading this report. So, I actually information by the so called doctors or some people advising them with this vaccine is not good. So they are influenced by those media, social media and plus more traditional lower we call it cultural level where the religion advises them not to get vaccine.

35:06

during the pandemic and the transition to online mode, how have teachers benefited from being a union member? Please share some examples.

35:18

Well, being a union member , if you face any issues in terms of no termination, or actually, where it is not justified, then the union is there to defend or protect your rights. And we also raised, for example, I had mentioned earlier regarding the spreading of this disease via physical contacts. So the union also raised this concern with the ministry. And then the ministry later came to support this by providing this online. Teaching to students where both are being practiced in the moment where physical contact, is there, plus use of this technology?

36:38

Has your union advocated for any policy changes for the teachers during the pandemic?

36:46

 No, no.

36:53

But you mentioned that some teachers had approached the Union for not meeting the parents during the during the COVID times. So did the union take any action? What was the response of the Union on that?

37:11

We discouraged the meeting with the parents were some of the teachers who advised to actually do not get in contact with the parents, but set up in such a way where parents have access to the resources when they come to school to collect without being in contact with the teacher. So these additional has been maintained between the parents and the teachers.

37:43

So whom did the union approach? Did the union approach the school for these negotiations? Or did you approach the ministry?

37:55

Normally, we issue a press release, raising our concerns. Because teachers raise their concerns, but not all of them. So we know. For this, we issued a media statement, raising our concern in terms of contct so the press release was published. And then through the press release, we raise this concern with the Ministry of Education.

38:32

Okay. Is it possible for you to share a few copies of these press releases that we've done in the last one year? Sure, no problem. I can find Yeah, over the email.

38:49

, has the union provided any form of support to teachers during the pandemic? Please elaborate. So, when I say support, it could mean support of giving a device or an internet connectivity or any kind of training or mental well being support any of these are defined under the words support.

39:17

i had mentioned this earlier regarding we supported our teachers through our credit loan, where teachers had access to small loans to provide the devices to carry out these requirements and in terms of of training the we have not been able to do it due to this restriction.

39:47

And how many teachers have made use of this availability of loans?

39:54

This has been introduced recently, so I do not really have the exact figure , most teachers, most teachers in the city and town have these resources, these resources those who do not have I cannot give an estimated number of say about say 50 teachers at this point in time, but the time to come many teachers will take the advantage of this product .

40:31

can you give me any idea of if teachers were stressed balancing , like you mentioned that they have to work from home. So, if they were stressed in managing this work from home our demands and the demands of domestic work etc, how did they deal with it?

40:54

 I haven't been able to get in contact and able to discuss this point where teachers are having any difficulty when trying

41:11

in your area, what kind of support will be needed by teachers for their work in future

41:20

mostly in terms of support in terms , if we are mostly we are moving towards digital era, we have most of the teaching the way I feel is going to be done online. So, they need the resources specially to facilitate these requirements.

41:46

Does your organization have any specific plans for supporting teachers in future?

41:56

Yes, the plans basically, like I said, we have introduced a product for teachers in terms of professional if we are given approval to carry on gathering of teachers. So, we can arrange a professional development workshop for teachers where we can advise them the requirements coming in and the changes that are taking place. And we also have our medical scheme through which many teachers are taking benefit of it, if there's a need by the teachers to for any health advice or treatment, then we are facilitating helping them

42:45

what are what are your main concerns with the with the teachers work in future?

42:55

Basically, the health and the safety at all when we this pandemic, the way we see it is going for a while now and then we will continue so the wellbeing of the teachers. If the schools open for face to face classes then there should be resources , the necessary protection medical for the teachers when they facilitate these teaching at school.

43:32

Did the teachers have to indulge in any other tasks other than teaching during the pandemic?

43:40

Some of these tasks are taking care of the students apart from teachers and counseling and other things. Definitely they will have to adapt to or maybe adapt to changing timeline.

44:08

So what are you saying is that they are supporting the students for in terms of counseling the students and these are like regular class teachers who have to take up this role.

44:24

No . They're sepecially qualified counselors, introduced at schools by the Ministry where they also do teaching and then they are also trained to do counseling at the same time.

44:44

How do you think teaching profession will change in future?

44:55

mostly the the way the teachers will be asked to carry out the requirements of teaching in terms of use of technologies, we are slowly moving away from this face to face into all these online classes during this pandemic and in coming future when we have this normal professional classes teacher, teachers, we will get to the extent of taking extra classes for students online after hours. So, this is become a learning for the teachers during this time.

45:44

Do you think digital learning technologies will continue to be used in future in your area?

45:50

This means definitely teachers are adapting to this new technologies that is coming up and I think the more that is more convenient for them to carry this through these platforms that are available.

46:11

And when the schools will reopen, do you think these zoom classes and other online platform that are being used now, when the schools will reopen, they will also be continued to be used.

46:28

And I think I mentioned this earlier, like the one school open the teachers will be required to do face to face teaching, but on the teacher's initiative after hours the they can use these technologies to carry out remedial classes or revisions for the students.

46:59

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me regarding the future of teachers work that has not been covered in the discussion so far?

47:14

Mostly teachers are required to be in schools from where they have very limited time available outside, actually in Fiji, where teachers are being required to stay within the premises and during even their lunch breaks and all required to supervise students are so and this is a concern. This is also the right to be given like especially the time to carry on the personal and the supervision part could be arranged with the school heads where they can facilitate these.

48:10

So this supervision, what is being supervised? Can you give me an idea of it

48:20

 What do you call like when the students have their lunch break or anything and then teachers are also having their lunch break. So this but not to that extent, it's not a major thing.

48:33

Right now students are not coming to school. Yes, yeah. So the supervisor must not be happening.

48:41

 Alright. So the I mean, I think I went out of context. Yeah, maybe what you're trying to say is this is an issue that happens in the regular school days that teachers have to be very vigilant of what students are doing even in their lunch break. So that adds to the workload of the teacher.

49:12

 Okay. Would you be able to suggest us any, any magazine or any newspaper that talks about teachers or brings out the issues of school teachers?

49:33

Luckily, we do not really have any magazines that have been published apart from the local newspaper. articles for not always but in our in them on teachers, especially during these COVID they are more articles where we have a column in Fiji times where people voice their opinions. So that is one of the phrases you can get. Okay.

50:02

Okay. And does the ftu have any website or a Facebook page?

50:09

Yes, we do have a website and Facebook pages will. Okay.

50:17

Thank you.

​