



# Strengthening Inclusive Education in Fiji

## Lessons Learned from AQEP | Policy brief

### Making schools disability-friendly



Students with vision impairment use Braille to help them read and learn.

## Introduction

Inclusive education offers children with disabilities the opportunity to attend school close to their homes, alongside their peers. With approximately 5% of all children across the globe experiencing disability<sup>1</sup>, there is a strong impetus for promoting and strengthening inclusive education. Since 2012, the Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP) has been strengthening inclusive education in Fiji, by supporting five Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools (IEDS) across the country, and helping the Ministry of Education (MoE) and other schools to channel lessons from these pilot experiences into policies and practices.

Building on these experiences, AQEP and the Ministry of Education worked together to

develop the *Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017 - 2020*, which was launched by the Minister of Education in November 2016. It provides a framework for action which aims to strengthen inclusive education across early childhood, primary, secondary and post-school education.

Inclusive education aims to provide educational opportunities to all children, regardless of their gender, ability, economic situation, religion, or ethnicity. Eliminating barriers for children with disabilities to access quality education in mainstream schools is essential for their inclusion.

An important principle of inclusive education is to provide infrastructure and equipment that creates user friendly educational environments for all, including children with disabilities<sup>2</sup>.

Hence, schools need to have accessible pathways, ramps, railings and/or other assistive modifications that allow children with disabilities to have full access to all school areas, as well as having suitable furniture and support devices. These are essential components in providing an accessible and inclusive learning environment for children with disabilities in mainstream schools, but also enable access for all community members – parents and teachers with disabilities, older people who are less mobile, and parents of small children.

The 2016 study *Lessons learned from inclusive education demonstration schools in Fiji*<sup>3</sup> highlights good practices and challenges of the Access to Quality Education Program's (AQEP) Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools, as experienced by a range of stakeholders. The study shows that improvements made to existing school structures have enabled an increasing number of children with disabilities to participate in inclusive education activities. The findings imply that making schools disability-friendly is a determining factor in whether or not children with disabilities attend school.

## Approach and results

The study was based on discussions with a range of stakeholders about the achievements and challenges of inclusive education in the AQEP demonstration schools. The data from these discussions were analysed according to identified themes; two themes were school infrastructure, and classroom equipment and assistive devices.

The rehabilitation of schools was a key activity of AQEP, which aimed to ensure facilities were adequate and safe and contributed to improved student learning and educational outcomes. Infrastructure improvements were made to existing structures to make classrooms and washrooms more accessible to children with disabilities, and pathways up to the school were created to enable easy access. Resource rooms were also fitted to each demonstration school to enable a private space for teacher aides to provide one-on-one learning sessions with children with disabilities.

The study revealed that although there were some problems with regard to accessibility (school not being fully accessible), the majority of study participants indicated that the infrastructure improvements were a significant factor in children with disabilities attending school. Many said that the changes had contributed to the increasing number of children with disabilities going to school, with many community members regarding the modifications as a motivating factor for sending children to the schools, irrespective of their disability.

In addition to the school modifications, all AQEP demonstration schools were equipped with supportive devices such as Braille machines and computers with screen-reading JAWS software. The study found, however, that the complexities of some disabilities made it challenging for teachers and teacher aides to include children in activities due to the lack of specific devices for some children.

While most teacher aides designed their own activities depending on the disability of the child, the findings suggest that children with disabilities would benefit from having access to equipment relevant to their disability, including suitable furniture that fits each child's requirements according to their disability.

Learning environments play an important part in how children with disabilities learn. Having equipment or learning devices that are modified to cater to the different needs of students improves the learning experiences and outcomes of children with disabilities.



A classroom desk has been modified and made accessible for children with vision impairment.

## Conclusion

The study found that school infrastructure modifications and specialised classroom equipment and supportive devices increase the opportunities for children with disabilities to receive a quality education.

Creating schools and school areas that are accessible to all children and furnishing classrooms with specialised equipment are necessary if children with disabilities are to access and participate in inclusive education in Fiji.

## Implications and recommendations

Based on study findings, recommendations are offered for improving and sustaining disability-friendly environments in mainstream inclusive education schools in Fiji.

### Disability-friendly schools

1. School management committees to be trained by MoE regarding how to manage maintenance issues related to accessibility
2. AQEP to share designs and standards of disability accessible schools with MoE to ensure future school refurbishment and reconstruction are suitably designed for children with disabilities
3. MoE to provide classroom equipment that is compatible to specific disabilities, such as furniture, books, and learning devices

4. Schools to use grants to fund equipment and assistive devices required by specific children with disabilities, and to replace and/or repair school equipment and assistive devices that are damaged in a timely manner

## References

1. World Bank and World Health Organization. (2011) 'World Report on Disability' accessed 9 November 2016: [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/70670/1/WHO\\_NMH\\_VIP\\_11.01\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/70670/1/WHO_NMH_VIP_11.01_eng.pdf)
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3. Caulfield, T., S. Baker and M. Daveta. (2016) 'Lessons learned from inclusive education demonstration schools in Fiji', Access to Quality Education Program, Suva.