

# Strengthening Inclusive Education in Fiji

## Lessons Learned from AQEP | Policy brief

### Resourcing schools for effective inclusive education in Fiji



Teacher aide provides one-to-one assistance to a child with disability.

## 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.

Children with disabilities living in low- and middle-income countries are more likely to be

out of school compared to other children<sup>2</sup>; their exclusion limits life opportunities and choices, reduces future earning potential, and prevents full participation in communities<sup>3</sup>. Inclusive education offers children with disabilities equal and increased opportunities to participate in educational activities in mainstream schools.

Inclusive education can only be effective, however, if schools are adequately resourced with qualified staff trained in inclusive education and with relevant teaching and support tools. With the Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP) concluding in mid-2017, it is imperative that teachers assigned to inclusive education schools are qualified to teach children with disabilities and have resources that support and assist them in the effective delivery of activities modified to meet the learning needs of children.

The 2016 study *Lessons learned from inclusive education demonstration schools in Fiji*<sup>4</sup> highlights good practices and challenges of AQEP's IEDS as experienced by a range of stakeholders. The study shows that many teachers were unqualified to teach children with disabilities; all teachers relied on teacher aides for advice and support on managing children with disabilities in classrooms.

Without teacher aides, the study suggests that inclusive education in Fiji would not be possible. Teacher aides modify learning activities so that the diverse needs of children with disabilities can participate in classroom activities.

The centrality of teacher aides to inclusive education is further articulated within *Fiji's Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017 – 2020*, which was launched by the Minister of Education in November 2016. This provides a framework for action which aims to strengthen inclusive education across early childhood, primary, secondary and post-school education.

## 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 was analysed according to identified themes; two key themes included staff capacity and inclusive education resources.

The study findings indicated that teachers had not learnt about inclusive education in their pre-service training and it was only through AQEP that they had gained some experience working with children with disabilities.

An AQEP study (2015) on teacher concerns and efficacy in implementing disability inclusive education found that continuous capacity development influenced the maintenance of positive attitudes, increased confidence, and improved teaching skills of teachers working with children with disabilities<sup>5</sup>. However, many teachers said they had received limited training on inclusive education. Many suggested that

this was due to the regular transfer of teachers to other schools, which reduced the number of trained teachers in schools.

The limited expertise of teachers contributed to a high reliance on teacher aides in the schools, without whom, inclusive education would not be possible. The study shows that both head teachers and teachers depend on teacher aides for their knowledge of and skills in managing children with disabilities in the classroom.

Given the expectations placed on teacher aides for their knowledge and skills and teachers' limited understanding of inclusive education, the study highlights the importance of providing regular training to enable teacher aides and teachers to support children with a wide range of disabilities, including slow learners and learning disabilities; the lack of confidence and ill-preparedness to teach children with disabilities can stem from limited training opportunities<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, the study signifies that appropriate resource materials are important assets that provide effective strategies and activities to teachers and teacher aides when educating children with disabilities alongside their peers in mainstream schools.

Many teachers were unaware of available resources in schools, such as the Disability Toolkit, and referred most of their difficulties to teacher aides, who were more aware of available tools and strategies that assisted the inclusion of children with disabilities. Utilising available resources such as special education teachers, and other inclusive education experts from Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), for example, were proposed as valuable reference and support points for both teachers and teacher aides.



Disability Inclusion Toolkit which includes informational resources for teachers.

## Conclusion

The study found that resourcing schools with qualified teachers and teacher aides, as well as providing appropriate knowledge resources, to which staff can refer when faced with challenging situations, are essential for ensuring positive educational outcomes of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

The success of inclusive education was determined by the utilisation of teacher aides in classrooms, teacher expertise in inclusive education, and practical resources to guide and support classroom activities. Equipping schools with qualified teachers and teacher aides, and practical resources are critical for expanding and sustaining inclusive education in Fiji.

## Implications and recommendations

For the sustainability of inclusive education in Fiji, schools need to be resourced appropriately to ensure children with disabilities can participate in educational activities in mainstream schools. Without teaching staff that are able to support the learning of children with disabilities, inclusive education will not be viable in mainstream schools in Fiji. Based on study findings, recommendations are offered for improving and sustaining resource provision for inclusive education in Fiji in line with the Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017 - 2020.

### Staff capacity

- a) Training institutions and universities to include compulsory inclusive education subjects/training in both primary and secondary teacher courses
- b) MoE and teacher training institutions to work together to oversee the provision

of regular in-service trainings to teachers and head teachers to support inclusive education.

- c)** Strengthen the cluster school approach, which builds relationships between mainstream and special schools to enable localised access to technical support and capacity development for teachers at mainstream schools by experienced special school teachers
- d)** MoE to reduce teacher transfers to enable staff capacity and expertise in inclusive education to be strengthened over time

### **Teaching and support resources**

- a)** MoE to appoint and integrate teacher aides into the education system to ensure the education of children with disabilities is supported in mainstream schools
- b)** Increase capacity in the Special and Inclusive Education Unit so that schools are effectively monitored and supported to provide inclusive education
- c)** MoE to ensure schools are equipped with necessary knowledge resources that are regularly updated so that teachers and teacher aides are adequately supported in their work with children with disabilities

## **References**

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