

Strengthening Inclusive Education in Fiji

Lessons Learned from AQEP | Policy brief

Changing attitudes about disability



A deaf student communicates with her peers in school using sign language.

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 disability¹, 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, and provides a framework for action which aims to strengthen inclusive education across early childhood, primary, secondary and post-school education.

People with disabilities often face negative attitudes and discrimination in their communities. In Pacific countries, such as Fiji, perceptions about children with disabilities are understood to be the result of a curse, a punishment for a wrongdoing or linked to forms of sorcery².

Children with disabilities are regularly teased or described in unpleasant ways. Subsequently, children with disabilities can be over-protected and cared for in ways that do not encourage

opportunities for education or independent lifestyles; their potential is limited by a high degree of dependence². Discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities are a major factor in children with disabilities not attending school; to overcome deeply held community beliefs that devalue the education of children with disabilities, it is essential that communities are educated about the learning capabilities of children with disabilities and the right to education for all children, including those with disabilities.

AQEP's 2016 study *Lessons learned from inclusive education demonstration schools in Fiji*³ underlines the positive outcomes of community awareness strategies that have contributed to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Building on the success of AQEP, the study emphasises that ongoing public awareness is required to maintain and advance positive changes in community attitudes about disability in Fiji.

Approach and results

The study is based on discussions with a range of stakeholders about the achievements and challenges of inclusive education in the five AQEP Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools. The data from these discussions were analysed according to identified themes; one key theme was related to community and staff attitudes about disability.

The study findings show that the community awareness sessions about inclusive education, conducted throughout the program in all AQEP schools and catchment areas of the demonstration schools, contributed to attitudinal change in communities and schools.

An AQEP study (2013) suggests that ignorance, stigma and discrimination, particularly among the less educated and in rural locations, are significant barriers to children with disabilities accessing education opportunities⁴.

With more parents sending their children with disabilities to schools, the presence of children with disabilities in classrooms has resulted in other students treating them as equals. This

is a significant change since students used to neglect and tease the children with disabilities; their interaction with children with disabilities has led to students' acceptance of diversity.

Additionally, the findings show that teacher, Head Teacher, and community attitudes generally have changed as a result of seeing how children support and relate with children with disabilities.

“ **A major outcome of the program has been the awareness change in the community. Before parents of children without disabilities had reservations about children with disabilities in schools alongside their own children as they thought their children would not learn. Community attitudes are changing and they are seeing the potential of these children.** ”
(AQEP staff)

Despite AQEP's success in changing attitudes about disability via community awareness programs, the study suggests that ongoing community education is needed to maintain and encourage further attitudinal change in schools and communities.

Some teachers and parents are reluctant to have children in mainstream schools; some teachers believed children with disabilities should be in special schools while some parents of children were not supportive of their child's education. This could be attributed to the limited training on inclusive education received by teachers involved in the study; previous studies suggest that ongoing training is important for the maintenance of teachers' positive attitudes⁵.

AQEP and schools developed activities to overcome attitudinal barriers to inclusive education, however, the study highlights that ongoing community awareness sessions are essential for advancing positive change in community attitudes about disability.



Conclusion

The study revealed that AQEP's community and school awareness sessions, which imparted information about the benefits of educating children with disabilities, have been a significant factor in changing community attitudes about the capabilities of children with disabilities.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools is an outcome of the awareness-raising sessions in communities and schools. Providing opportunities to children with disabilities to receive an education in mainstream schools is dependent upon changing attitudes about disability in communities and schools.

Implications and recommendations

Changing attitudes about disability is a significant component in children with disabilities receiving a quality education in Fiji. Without attitudinal change, the right to education for all children will not be realised. The recommendations below offer ways to continue the transformation in attitudes that is already occurring in communities and schools.

1. Continue awareness raising workshops and roadshows in schools and communities to improve attitudes about disability and to facilitate children with disabilities' access to educational opportunities in mainstream schools
2. Ministry of Education to work together with Disabled People's Organisations to develop advocacy strategies to raise awareness about disability through different media that education is a right for all children

References

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