



## DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN FIJI

### LEARNING FROM THE AUSTRALIAN AID-FUNDED ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAM (AQEP)

**Key Summary:** The Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP) was a six-year program focused on improving access to and quality of education for children disadvantaged by poverty, location, disability or gender. The program's Disability Inclusion Strategy facilitated outcomes including increased enrolment and attendance of children with disabilities, reduction in out-of-school children with disabilities, accessible school infrastructure, increased skills and confidence amongst teachers, increased community awareness, the establishment of the Special and Inclusive Education Policy and accompanying Implementation Plan, and the development and implementation of a disability disaggregation package for the Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS). By AQEP's closure, the Ministry of Education had started engaging Teacher Aides to support students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools, and established a school inclusion grant which used FEMIS disability data to determine which schools required additional grants to support inclusion.

which focussed mainly on strengthening special schools, many children with disabilities were out of school. The Ministry of Education, Heritage and the Arts (MEHA) in Fiji was beginning efforts to support disability-inclusive education, but few resources were available to implement this approach.

The Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP, 2011 – 2017) worked with the MEHA to improve the ability of children, including those with disabilities, from poor communities surrounding 85 schools to access a quality school education.

#### Disability-inclusive education as an essential element of the education program

AQEP worked towards two outcomes:

1. Improved access for children from poor communities and reduction in disparities in access due to location, disability and gender.
2. Improved quality of education for children from poor communities – student learning improved in literacy and numeracy- and reduction in disparities due to location, disability and gender.

#### Background

In Fiji, as in much of the world, children with disabilities are less likely to attend school than children without disabilities. To meet Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals and to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) children with disabilities must be supported to access a quality education.

In Fiji in 2011, the majority of children with disabilities who were enrolled in school were attending one of seventeen special education centres concentrated in urban areas. Access to education for children with disabilities in rural, remote and maritime areas was limited, and despite the existence of the *Policy on Effective Implementation of Special and Inclusive Education*,

Children from an inclusive education demonstration school in a remote island practising sign language. ©DFAT



Activities were undertaken under three interrelated components:

**Component 1** focused on strengthening school-based management and teacher capacity, including access and equity grant funding to specific targeted schools.

**Component 2** focused on upgrading physical infrastructure in targeted schools to improve the physical learning environment.

**Component 3** supported the strengthening of the Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS) to enable evidence-based decision-making and reporting at school and Ministry levels, and demand driven activities.

AQEP also supported the rehabilitation of schools and restoration of education in schools affected by disasters. During AQEP's implementation period, this included floods and two major tropical cyclones.

### AQEP's Disability Inclusion Strategy

AQEP's Disability Inclusion Strategy was developed in 2012 following an extensive stakeholder engagement and consultation processes. The strategy was guided by the twin-track approach, which **mainstreamed** activities across AQEP's three components, and focused **specifically** on two areas while ensuring engagement and cooperation with Disabled Peoples Organizations (DPOs): (i) modelling inclusion in demonstration schools, and (ii) creating an enabling framework within the MEHA.

### Modelling inclusion in five inclusive education demonstration schools

Five demonstration schools - including one in each education division, plus Suva, were selected to model inclusive education. Selection **criteria** were:

- co-located with an early childhood education (ECE) centre and secondary school to support opportunities for early intervention and transition for students with disabilities;
- located close to a road to enable access for children from a range of areas; and
- located in a range of urban, rural and remote locations, to model inclusive education in settings relatable to many schools.

Activities in the demonstration schools focused on:

- *Staffing* through funding and professional development for three Teacher Aides per

school, providing support in class for children with a variety of needs, including Deaf students, students with vision, mobility and speech impairments and with intellectual disabilities and other learning difficulties;

- *Training* of teachers, head teachers and teacher aides;
- *Awareness raising* in the communities surrounding the schools, led by DPOs;
- Regular *mentoring and monitoring visits* from program and MEHA staff;
- *Referral* of children to health services including for rehabilitation and assistive devices;
- *Accessible renovations* to school buildings (including water and sanitation facilities);
- Provision of *learning resources*; and
- *Systematic collection of stories, information and feedback* from the demonstration schools to improve mainstreaming across the broader components of the program, and increase understanding of inclusive education within the MEHA. This focus on the practical, and using a learning-while-doing approach stands out as a key success of the program at individual, classroom, school, education system and policy levels.

### Creating an enabling MOE policy and systems framework for inclusive education

Lessons from the demonstration schools informed development of policy and practice to strengthen inclusive education across Fiji, and influenced ownership of this approach at policy and school levels. Systems level activities included:

- *Partnership approach to ensure local ownership and sustainability of disability-inclusive education efforts.* Decision-making and implementation of AQEP's disability-inclusive education efforts were undertaken together with MEHA counterparts. AQEP's disability inclusion team was eventually viewed almost as an extension of MEHA's Special and Inclusive Education Unit, which was limited in its capacity to initiate and implement new efforts due to the existence of only one staff member. This approach ensured disability-inclusive education efforts were locally owned, and supported their sustainability beyond AQEP.

- *Development of a disability disaggregation package within FEMIS, to enable the collection and use of student disability data.* The creation and embedding of the disability disaggregation package within FEMIS, undertaken in cooperation with MEHA and utilising expertise from people in regular and special schools and DPOs, resulted in integrated system-wide data management. This is a significant contribution which enables teachers to identify and support individual students with disabilities, and allows the MEHA to plan, monitor and report on inclusive education efforts against national and international indicators;
- *Development of a Toolkit for Disability-Inclusive Education in Fiji.* Drawing on experiences in Fiji and international good practices, AQEP supported the development of a toolkit which included a contextualised teaching practices handbook, factsheets, posters and other informational resources which could be used by teachers to address practical concerns and promote inclusion. The Toolkit was distributed to all schools in Fiji.
- *School inclusion grants* were disbursed to support inclusive education. At AQEP's closure, the MEHA was utilising enrolment data regarding students with disability, obtained through the FEMIS disability disaggregation package supported by AQEP, to determine which schools require additional grants to support inclusion;
- *Tapping into expertise* and resources available in special education schools to benefit students in inclusive education. While this support was not available consistently due to geographic and time factors, where it was used this was a valued input;
- *Supporting mainstream literacy and numeracy efforts to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and teach children with dyslexia.* Based on demand from teachers, AQEP worked with the MEHA to develop a *Dyslexia Indicators Assessment Tool*. This was embedded within general literacy improvement packages developed by AQEP.
- *Establishing an inclusive education policy and implementation plan.* Lessons from AQEP's inclusive education efforts informed the development of the *Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017 - 2020*. Its indicators drew from the

Pacific Indicators for Disability-Inclusive Education research project (Pacific INDIE), which was funded by the Australian Government. The FEMIS disability disaggregation package provides the means to measure progress against the plan.

### Engagement and involvement of DPOs

Cooperation with DPOs was integral to implementation of the Disability Inclusion Strategy. Engagement with DPOs contributed to three key aspects of the program:

1. DPOs were contracted to undertake awareness-raising in demonstration school communities.
2. DPOs represented the perspectives of people with disabilities in consultations which guided development of MEHA policies and the FEMIS data disaggregation package.
3. DPOs were essential to research and learning activities which informed the program and influenced MEHA's wider policy environment. These included a study exploring barriers and enablers of disability-inclusive education at AQEP's outset, program evaluations and specific studies commissioned to inform program direction and post-program recommendations.

Children from an inclusive education demonstration school in a rural area playing with sporting equipment brought by Australian volunteer. ©Jane Strickland



## Outcomes

AQEP concluded in 2017. Notable outcomes of its disability-inclusive education efforts include:

- Attendance of children with disabilities at the demonstration schools rose from 6 in 2011 to 69 in 2017. At 3.3%, the proportion of children with disabilities enrolled at these schools met the end-program target of 3%.
- The number of out-of-school children with disabilities in communities surrounding the five demonstration schools reduced by 43%.
- 49 schools were made accessible.
- The FEMIS Disability Disaggregation Package was used by all (100%) AQEP-supported schools to identify children with disabilities and record the data on FEMIS. Through the use of this package, 60 AQEP-supported schools (70.6%) identified that children with disabilities were enrolled.
- The number of children with disabilities sitting for national standardised literacy and numeracy exams increased.
- Evaluations found greater acceptance of students with disabilities by their peers and teachers and improved community awareness of the rights of children with disabilities to attend neighbourhood schools.
- Monitoring data found that teacher confidence in teaching children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms improved.
- Teacher Aides originally funded by the program are now funded by the MEHA to support classroom inclusion.
- Responsibility for payment of grants to demonstration schools shifted from AQEP to MEHA, which now pays a grant to all schools which enrol children with disabilities. Disability status is determined through application of the FEMIS Disability Disaggregation Package.
- The establishment of the Special and Inclusive Education Policy 2017 – 2020 and accompanying implementation plan at MEHA provided a road map for future work and contributed significantly to sustainability.

## What worked

- An initial study of the drivers of exclusion of children with disabilities from school informed the development of a contextualized disability inclusion strategy which guided subsequent work, was in line with and supported the furthering of broader government commitments to disability inclusion and rights.
- A two-pronged approach: Working on the practical aspects of school inclusion in demonstration schools, while also strengthening the policy framework.
- Strong ongoing collaboration with various divisions within the MEHA, including the Special and Inclusive Education Unit. This involved the identification of shared objectives, and development of mutually agreed work plans in order to reach these.
- A staged approach which allowed learning from demonstration schools and feedback from primary stakeholders, was conducive to program quality as well as to policy level ownership.
- The demonstration school selection criterion related to the availability of onsite early childhood, primary and secondary educational provision provided an environment conducive to a focus on transition and student retention.
- Awareness raising activities led by DPOs challenged and changed attitudes.
- The development of a tool to reliably identify students with disabilities within FEMIS enabled teachers to determine evidence-based teaching approaches, informed MEHA resource allocation, and enabled monitoring of progress towards Fiji's national and international policy commitments.
- Investment in studying the methods and outcomes from the perspective of various stakeholders including students and families promoted good practices and "learning by doing".
- Linking children and families with health related services (including rehabilitation and assistive devices) supported stronger outcomes for children with and without disabilities.

- Where cooperation with special education facilities occurred, this enabled access to expertise and increased referrals of students from special education to inclusive education settings, and provided useful input to MEHA policy development.
- Embedding inclusive education efforts within the framework of a mainstream education program resulted in stronger ownership and outlook for sustainability.

## Lessons learned

- Forming deep, respectful and trusting relationships with key stakeholders across schools, the MEHA, DPOs and others promoted the collaborative identification of shared goals and mutually agreed work plans.
- Taking an adaptive approach to implementation – being able to shift or introduce activities and time frames according to contextual realities and priorities – was central to the achievement of sustainable outcomes.
- Advocacy and information about the rights of children with disabilities to education, led by DPOs, contributed to parent, school and general community awareness.
- Budget for Disabled Peoples Organization involvement in implementation and research activities, and in awareness-raising, enabled successful engagement.
- Budget for learning, including for initial situation analysis, particularly as little baseline information was available, enabled evidence-based planning and implementation.
- MEHA monitoring and mentoring in use of school grants to ensure maximization of their benefit supported more effective use of funds.
- The use of information available through FEMIS provided evidence for decision-making in planning and implementation, and enabled monitoring against national and international policy commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals.
- A whole-of-school approach involving head teachers, classroom teachers, teacher aides, students and parents facilitated inclusive education and active participation of students with disabilities in school activities.
- Onward sustainability required adequate staffing and budget for the relevant MEHA unit.
- A collaborative relationship between AQEP and the MEHA resulted in local uptake of useful tools and resources, and recognition of the leadership role of MEHA in achieving disability-inclusive education.
- Focusing on improving both teaching methodologies and accessible infrastructure in schools improves quality education for students with disabilities.
- While the employment of Teacher Aides may not be seen as best practice in some contexts, due to class size and other contextual factors this proved useful in Fiji. Through these Teacher Aides, classrooms had access to support for sign language, and for students with a range of impairments including vision, mobility, speech, intellectual and other learning disabilities.
- Class size, teacher turnover and a limited availability of training expertise and time constrained the work at various times. Despite this, the dedication of school and MEHA staff and the regular use of feedback mechanisms enabling parents, students, school staff, teachers and administrators to provide input and shape the program, provided a positive and constructive means to move forward.

## Next steps

Now that the model is tested, priorities focus on embedding and strengthening inclusive education approaches, including:

- Strengthening pre-service teacher training to enable all teachers to become confident leaders of inclusive classrooms.
- Reviewing and strengthening data collection, analysis and use.
- Strengthening referral processes to enable children with disabilities to have optimal access to education and health services.
- Continuing to mainstream the rights and requirements of children with disabilities across MEHA and school policies and processes.
- Scaled-up engagement of Teacher Aides to support inclusive classrooms.
- Continued awareness raising.



A teacher aide communicates with two students in an inclusive education demonstration school, supported with disability-inclusive training from AQEP. ©DFAT.

## Want to learn more about this work?

The program commitment to learning and reflection has provided a wealth of information drawn upon for this case study. If you are interested in learning more about specific aspects of this program, detailed information is available in the following documents. Contact the **DID4All** help desk if you are interested in any of the following areas:

### POLICY BRIEFS AND BEST PRACTICES DEVELOPED BY AQEP

**Strengthening Teacher Training Institutions** to support Inclusive Education in Fiji, Policy Brief ([link](#))

**Changing Attitudes** about Disability, Policy Brief ([link](#))

**Making Schools Disability Friendly**, Policy Brief ([link](#))

**Resourcing** Schools for Effective Inclusive Education in Fiji, Policy Brief ([link](#))

**Assessment and Transition** to Secondary School for Students with Disabilities, Policy Brief

**FEMIS Disability Disaggregation Package**: a tool to enable the standardised identification of students with disabilities, and disaggregation of disability data within Fiji's Education Management Information System. ([link](#))

**Toolkit for Disability-Inclusive Education in Fiji**: education resource for schools incorporating a locally-developed handbook, fact sheets and posters. ([link](#))