

Strengthening Inclusive Education in Fiji

Lessons Learned from AQEP | Policy brief | June 2017

Strengthening Teacher Training Institutions to support Inclusive Education



A teacher uses Literacy and Numeracy teaching strategies to educate children in a disability inclusive school.

Introduction

Inclusive education offers children with disabilities the opportunity to attend school close to their homes, in their own communities, alongside their friends and neighbours. 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), funded by the Australian Government, has been strengthening inclusive education in Fiji. AQEP has supported five Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools across the country, and helped the Ministry of Education and other schools to channel lessons from these pilot experiences into policies and practices.

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 crucial for their inclusion. Essential contributors to effective inclusive education include positive teacher attitudes, and teacher knowledge and skills to teach in an inclusive way².

Teachers will be more committed to change if they receive assistance in mastering the skills required to implement inclusion³. AQEP's 2016 study, *Lessons learned from Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools in Fiji*, found that where teachers had participated in in-service training on inclusive education, they felt confident about including children with disabilities in their classrooms⁴. When teachers felt unqualified to teach children with disabilities, they felt anxious and relied on teacher aides for advice and support on managing children with disabilities in their classrooms. This strategy worked when teacher aides were employed at the



A teacher aide assists students with a disability.

school; however, not all inclusive schools have this resource. Further, teacher aides themselves lack access to formal training.

In November 2016, Fiji's Minister of Education endorsed the ***Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017–2020***⁵. This recommends the review of existing curricula at Fiji's five teacher training institutions, and the development and implementation of recommendations to support the integration of special and inclusive education training into Fiji's teacher training programs in a consistent and harmonised way. This policy brief supports this work by presenting information on the disability courses currently offered by Fiji's teacher training institutions, and recommending further actions.

Approach

This policy note was informed by a desk review and survey responses. The review explored the different special and inclusive education courses currently taught at the five teacher training institutions in Fiji, including their content and duration, and the experiences of graduates from these universities. Relevant course workbooks and module descriptors were requested, and those received were analysed. With the assistance of the Ministry of Education's Senior Education Officer, Special and Inclusive Education, a survey was distributed to school teachers, head teachers and university lecturers. Findings were compared to those in international literature, and are presented here. Limitations include limited teacher and head teacher responses to the survey; and that course workbooks were not provided by every institution approached.

Findings

The following is a summary of current inclusive education practices and resources at Fiji's teacher training institutions.

University of the South Pacific (USP)

Of the 24 disability-related courses available to teacher trainees at USP, three are compulsory. These include two courses offered to Early Childhood Teacher Trainees, and one to Primary and Secondary Teacher Trainees. The other programs are specialised options available to students doing a Bachelor in Special and Inclusive Education.

Descriptions of the three compulsory subjects are provided below.

1. The Study of Exceptional Individuals (ED208) briefly introduces students to teaching individuals with diverse educational needs. Course topics include the study of persons who are gifted and talented, and those with learning disability, emotional disorders, behavioural disorders, sensory impairments, and physical impairments. This course is available only to students doing a Bachelor in Early Childhood Education or Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Commerce/Bachelor of Science with Graduate Certificate in Education for Secondary teachers.
2. Educating Individuals with Learning Disabilities (ED 321) assists students to identify children with developmental and academic learning disabilities in their classrooms. Teachers learn how to identify students with learning disabilities, assess their individual needs, develop and implement appropriate informal



USP inclusive education course books.

tests, develop observation skills, analyse assessment data, develop Individual Education Plans based on assessment data, prioritise what to teach, develop teaching resources and aids, and explore specific strategies and activities to facilitate children's participation and learning. The course is available to students doing a Bachelor in Early Childhood or a Bachelor in Primary Education.

3. Educating Individuals with Intellectual Differences (ED 309) enables students to work with people at different intellectual levels: low cognitive functioning to gifted and talented. Students acquire knowledge on current research, theories and models of intellectual diversity, and issues such as access to education and support for inclusion across the general curriculum. The course is only available for students doing a Bachelor in Early Childhood Education.

University of Fiji (UoF)

The University of Fiji offers one course that focuses on Diversity and Differentiated Learning: Educating Students with Diverse Abilities (EDU 222). It is a compulsory course and has been exclusively developed by the University of Fiji, taking into consideration the diverse needs of learners.

Differentiated instruction is a way of teaching that recognises variations in learning styles among children. Classrooms are diverse environments; differentiated learning theory suggests that, for children with mixed abilities to learn, the teacher must adjust both the curriculum and presentation of the curriculum to match that diversity. Rather than simply 'teaching to the middle' by providing a single avenue for learning for all students in a class, teachers using differentiated instruction match tasks, activities and assessments with their students' interests, abilities, and learning preferences.

UoF's Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) first cohort of 17 students graduated in April 2016 with a similar number graduating in 2017.

Fulton College

Fulton College offers a course on Inclusive Education (BPES 202), which is compulsory for all second-year students doing a Bachelor of Primary Education. Although it is a compulsory course, the college does not have a teaching or student handbook but a module descriptor that is used by the lecturer. The course examines inclusive pedagogy relevant to catering for children with disabilities. It aims to provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to cope in an

inclusive classroom situation. Students also gain an awareness and understanding of people with learning, behavioural, physical and/or multiple health impairments who still have the capacity to learn effectively. Strategies and interventions related to integrating inclusive education into Pacific educational curricula are also explored and evaluated. More than 60 students will be taking this course in 2017, and the lecturers all have a postgraduate degree.

Fiji National University (FNU)

FNU, Fiji's largest teacher training institution, does not offer any courses on disability, special or inclusive education. In 2016, 277 teacher trainees graduated from FNU, and 215 graduated in 2015.

Corpus Christi Teachers College

Corpus Christi offers one course entitled Teaching for Special Needs (ED 243), which is a compulsory course offered to all second-year students. It focuses on preparing teacher trainees to work in special schools, and includes a one-day field trip to visit some nearby special schools. The college employs a lecturer who has a Master's in Special Education.

Analysis

Course Content

The teacher training curricula on special and/or inclusive education offered across the four institutions differ in scope, focus, philosophical underpinning and detail. For example, while some courses (Fulton College, USP, UoF) make efforts to train teachers in skills they will require to support students with different abilities and learning needs in a mainstream classroom, others (Corpus Christi) focus on training teachers for the special education sector. This is an important difference: special and inclusive schools operate very differently, and are both important providers in Fiji's education system. Teachers must be prepared to teach students with disabilities in both mainstream and special schools.

Responses from teachers and head teachers indicate that there is a big gap between what is taught and the reality faced by teachers in the classroom. Challenges reportedly faced by new graduates include:

- dealing with children in complex life situations, influenced as much by their socio-economic background as their disability,
- availability of appropriate teaching resources,

- varying degrees of parental support/awareness,
- understanding of different abilities and needs,
- lack of knowledge of sign language,
- classroom and behaviour management,
- communication strategies,
- strategies for supporting students with multiple or high support needs,
- supporting students with autism,
- teaching life skills,
- assessing and identifying students who have a disability,
- designing appropriate programs and activities,
- using Individual Education Plans, and
- modifying activities for different learners.

Special and inclusive education programs were found to be largely theory-based, with little observation or practical component. Some courses require students to observe at a special school for a day or part thereof, in order to write their assignment. Even though it is important to educate teachers to grasp the theory behind a concept, as indicated by respondents to this study, the practical realities are much more complex and challenging, and make more sense when viewed in action³.

Course Material

While course workbooks exist at USP, Corpus Christi and UoF, not all of these were available for review. Course materials should offer valuable insights into key theoretical concepts, and should convey practical, real-life experiences that help to put the theories into context⁶.

The special and inclusive education field of study is continually evolving as experiences across the globe, including in Fiji, inform evidence and practice. Course materials must keep up to date with this evolution to remain contextually relevant and practical.

Curriculum

While the existence of specific compulsory education for teacher trainees in special and inclusive education may be an indicator of the readiness of teacher trainees to work in inclusive or special school settings, the treatment of inclusive education as a stand-alone subject can also risk implying that inclusive education is a separate, specialist issue within education, rather than an issue that every teacher needs to know about and take action on⁶. As a result, when teachers start working in schools, they are not often fully prepared (or possibly unwilling) to welcome diversity and address the challenges that a diverse class of



A teacher assists a child with disability in reading.

learners may present. This is in evidence when children with disabilities are referred to special schools, rather than being educated in their own mainstream local school, because special school teachers are said to specialise in this field.

In the absence of trained and confident teachers, schools are beginning to rely on teacher aides⁴. However, teacher aides also lack formal training opportunities and learn on the job, which is less than ideal, especially when they are learning from teachers with minimal / no training themselves.

Conclusion

Four of Fiji's five teacher training institutions offer programs through which teacher trainees are exposed to information regarding special and inclusive education techniques and modalities. However, these differ starkly from each other, and are reported to have a limited effect on preparing teachers to teach students with different needs. A gap exists between what pre-service teachers learn and the reality of day-to-day teaching experiences because of the emphasis of training based on theory, rather than on practice.

The revision and redevelopment of disability related courses in teacher training institutions is critical if Fiji is to promote and sustain inclusive education. Not only will it ensure that school leaders and classroom teachers are knowledgeable in the area of disability, but that they are able to implement

teaching and learning strategies to accommodate and enhance the education of students with disabilities in line with the Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017–2020. It will also ensure that inclusion means more than just enrolment of students with disabilities in mainstream schools; that it fosters the active participation of students with disabilities in classroom activities and school life.

If pre-service teachers hear inclusive messages throughout their initial training, and if they learn inclusive practices in all education courses and are given time to observe and carry out their practicum in inclusive schools, there is a greater chance that inclusive practice will become a norm. In-service education regarding disability is important, but is not enough to permanently build the skills and confidence of teachers in this field; the solid foundations that can only be provided by strong pre-service training and experience are required.

This review has identified that the quality of teachers teaching children with disability will depend on compulsory inclusive education course(s) in all Fijian teacher training institutions, the quality of the Inclusive Education curriculum for teachers, and the availability of quality teaching materials in universities.

Recommendations

1. Pre-service training in inclusive education should be compulsory in all educational programs offered by all five of Fiji's teacher training institutions.
2. Fiji's Ministry of Education should develop standards which require all teacher training institutions to develop/use curricula that educate every intending teacher about inclusive education according to the model set out in the Special and Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Plan 2017–2020, and in line with a set of agreed principles and competencies.
3. Pre-service teacher education curricula for all teacher training institutions should be revised or developed so that all teacher trainees are aware of, and supported towards, inclusive education learning goals:
 - a. Pre-service teacher education curricula must be revised or developed to be responsive to the range of beliefs and experiences among all teacher trainees – helping them to reflect on, and change, attitudes where necessary, and then move on to building practical skills and confidence to implement inclusive education.
 - b. Lecturers in special and inclusive education may require capacity development to strengthen their ability and confidence to implement inclusive education curricula.
 - c. Those who design and deliver teacher education curricula will need to be supported towards the development of a holistic and strategic curriculum. To be truly inclusive, it will need to reflect the contribution of classroom teachers, persons with disabilities and other important stakeholders.
4. Given the vital role played by teacher aides to support teachers in the implementation of inclusive education, formal training must be also developed to enable the development of their skills and confidence.

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