Introduction

From talking and listening to people in the community, it would appear that there is still some confusion and misunderstanding regarding the terms "exceptionality" and "special education". This article intends to give readers a better understanding of these two terms, and to erase whatever misconceptions they previously held.

Terminology

Society's attitudes towards people with disabilities are reflected in a change in terminology. Previously, terms like handicapped, crippled, idiot, imbecile, moron and the like were used to classify people with disabilities. As people became more caring and accommodating, terms became less negative and stigmatising. Examples of current acceptable terms are: exceptional, special needs, diverse needs, high support needs, person with a disability. Modern texts would have titles like Educating Exceptional Children, Exceptional Children, Children with Exceptionalities.

The person is focussed on first, not the disability, as it is recognised that often the person has a disability in only one area. The whole person is not disabled. Hence, examples of politically correct terminology would be:

- Person with learning difficulty/disability
- Person with Down syndrome
- Person with cerebral palsy
- Person with hearing impairment
- Person with behaviour/emotional problems
- Person with physical disabilities
- Person with special needs

Who are exceptional children?

Exceptional children are those who differ from the norm to such an extent that they require a modification of school practices, or special educational services/ interventions (e.g. medical, educational, social, behaviour modification) to fulfill their potential. Children with exceptionalities differ from the norm in the following areas:

- Intellectual giftedness and special talent.
- Behavioural differences: children who are emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted.
- Learning difficulties.
- Communication (speech and language) disorders.
- Sensory differences – hearing, vision (from mild e.g. cannot read the writing on the blackboard, or cannot hear instruction clearly if sitting at the back of the room, to severe, when more specialised intervention is needed).
- Physical impairments (orthopedic).
- Chronic health problems e.g. epilepsy, diabetes, allergies, asthma.
- Neglected and abused children.
- Multiple disabilities.

These areas of exceptionality can be grouped into two further categories:

1. **High Incidence** (occurs more frequently in the general population).
2. **Low Incidence** (occurs less frequently in the general population).

High Incidence Disabilities

These categories occur more frequently in any population. High incidence categories are: Learning Disabilities (LD), speech impairment, intellectual impairment, and behaviourally disturbed. Note that individuals in these categories have no obvious physical disabilities, appear "normal", and their special needs may not be given any priority, or may be ignored.

Figure 1 – High Incidence disabilities. Kirk et al (1997)
Low Incidence Disabilities

These categories occur less frequently in any population. Low incidence categories are: multiple disabilities, speech impairments, visual impairments, orthopaedic impairments, other health impairments.

Figure 2 - Low Incidence disabilities Kirk et al (1997)

Fiji: Prevalence Counts for Persons with Exceptionalities

Unfortunately, the census data do not provide an accurate picture of prevalence counts for persons with special needs in Fiji. This is because some categories of exceptionality are not included, e.g. behaviourally/emotionally disturbed, gifted and talented, learning disability, speech impairment. Only five types of disability are listed in the Enumerator's Manual (Walsh, 1999). These (with definitions for enumerators) are:

- **Sight** – when the person is either partially or totally blind.
- **Intelligence** – when the person has partial or no control over his mental faculty.
- **Hearing** – when the person is either partially or fully deaf.
- **Physical** – when the person has loss of motion or limbs.
- **Age** – when extreme old age prevents the person from performing daily living activities e.g. feeding, dressing, socialising, communicating.
- **Other** – any other disability that is not among the five classifications listed above.

Figure 3 – Disability Types – Fiji: Walsh, 1999. Data from 1996 census.

- Sight: 1279
- Intelligence: 1777
- Hearing: 1013
- Physical: 4444
- Aged: 1556
- Other: 1511
- Not stated: 370
- Total: 11950
Special Education

Special education is appropriate intervention that is designed to cater for the unique needs of children with exceptionalities e.g. children with learning difficulties, behaviour problems, social adjustment problems, mobility difficulties, and so on. Some children with exceptionalities may require special aids, modification or special adaptations to the school environment. Gifted children are regarded as exceptional because they also need special programmes and/or specialised help to develop their special talents to the fullest.

Special education is, first of all, purposeful intervention. Successful interventions prevent, eliminate, and/or overcome the obstacles that might keep an individual with disabilities from learning and from full and active participation in school and society. (Heward 2000)

Special education is founded on the proposition that all children reach their full potential given the opportunity, effective teaching, and proper resources. (Winzer 1993)

Special Schools in Fiji

There are 14 special schools in Fiji, which are recognised by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and are within the Primary Section of the MOE. These schools cater for children with physical, cognitive, sensory (hearing, vision), and multiple impairments, as well as for children with learning disabilities and behavioural problems (Suva Special School). Many of these special schools prepare students for mainstreaming whenever this is possible.

These schools are located in the urban/town areas in Suva, Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka, Ba, Rakiraki, Nausori, Labasa, Savusavu, and Levuka. However, children with special needs in rural areas and outer islands are disadvantaged.

From Segregation to Inclusion

There is now a shift from the policy of educational segregation of children with special needs/exceptionality to one of inclusion. This simply means that the trend is to provide these children with education in the regular or mainstream school, as the belief is that all children have the right to equal educational opportunities. This is already happening in rural areas or in some countries in the region where there are no special schools. The regular school has to cater for all children, with or without exceptionalities. A higher percentage of special educational services are already taking place in regular schools (teachers call this remedial work). Inclusion also refers to inclusion in the family, community, and wider society for persons with special needs of all ages – from infancy to adulthood.

Teacher training in Fiji

Because of increasing awareness of the special needs area, teacher training institutions have started to include courses in special education in their programmes e.g. Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE), Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC), the University of the South Pacific (USP).

Fiji College of Advanced Education
FCAE offers a one-term course for final year (Yr. 2) students: Children with Special Needs.

Lautoka Teachers' College
From 1999, LTC started offering a one-year course for licensed teachers who work in special schools. Every year, 15 licensed teachers are selected for training at LTC for this course. In addition, LTC has recently included a one-term course on special education for all teacher trainees.

The University of the South Pacific
The USP offers an 8 course Diploma in special education (Diploma in Special and Diverse Educational Needs), which was developed in consultation with educators and other key persons involved with special education in Fiji.

In addition to this, some courses within the BEd programme, both primary and secondary, include modules on special education (e.g. ED 353, ED 319).

What is still Needed

Although it is encouraging that there is an increasing awareness of special education, a lot more could and should be done. Parents and caregivers are often reluctant to send their children to special schools,
because of the stigma attached to special school placement. Teachers in special schools also feel that some children who are referred to them can be catered for in the regular schools. This often causes conflict between home and school.

Parents, teachers, and other key persons who work in the special needs area feel that there is a need for more government (MOE) support. Specifically, there is a need for:

- outreach programmes to cater for rural children with special needs
- more funding
- public awareness and education
- a central organised body to deal with special education issues
- a systematic referral procedure, as the current system is haphazard and inadequate
- teacher training and in-service workshops in special education
- educational psychologists and school counsellors to assist teachers with placement decisions, and to counsel families with children who have special needs
- parent education. (Heeraman 997:133).

The Ecological Approach/Model

The context/ecology of the exceptional child affects to a great extent the child’s achievement, positively or negatively. The context of the exceptional child is the family, school, peers, and society. The view is that improving the environment surrounding the child leads to improving the child’s progress. The school is not alone in working with the child with an exceptionality. Counsellors, speech therapists, psychologists, medical personnel, physiotherapists are all part of an interdisciplinary team to provide services to children and youth with exceptionalities.

The ecological approach seeks to modify the child’s behaviour directly by improving the context in which the child lives, learns and plays.

Kirk (1997)

Summary

The term exceptionality covers a wide area — from disabilities that are obvious (physical, multiple) to those that are not (learning disabilities, behavioural, emotional, chronic health problems). Current terminology for people with disabilities reflect a more positive and caring attitude. High incidence exceptionalities (LD, intellectual impairment, speech impairment, behaviourally disturbed) are usually not obvious and may often go unnoticed and untreated. The belief that every child has a right to equal educational opportunities has brought about a shift from education segregation to inclusion (mainstreaming) for people with exceptionalities. Parents are often reluctant to enrol their children in special schools. With teacher training in the special needs area, more children would be catered for in the regular schools (inclusion), as teachers would develop the confidence and knowledge to cater for these children. The context of the exceptional child (ecology) plays an important role in the child’s progress. The context of the child includes the family, school, peers, and the wider society. These all have a very important role to play in the development of the exceptional person.
References


