Inclusive education in the Pacific

Chapter 3

Inclusive education: a Pacific perspective

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The meaning and implications of inclusion

People of the Pacific are urged to note that inclusive education, as defined by UNESCO\(^1\), is ‘a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning … and reducing exclusion within and from education’ (Booth, 1996 cited in UNESCO, 2003:7). The objective is to support education for all, with special emphasis on removing barriers to participation for children with disabilities and for out-of-school children. The statement notes that the overall goal is a school that adapts to the needs of all learners and where all children can participate and be treated equally—it is thus imperative that the word *all* effectively includes children with disabilities.

It is in this definition that we see that inclusive education seeks to address the learning needs of all children, with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. At the core of inclusive education is the fundamental right to education for all. From the adoption of the principle of inclusive education at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Spain in 1994 and its affirmation at the World Education Forum, the challenge of getting all children into school has been put on the political agenda in many countries. In the Pacific, it is reflected in the Forum Basic Education Action Plan and in commitments to achieving Education for All. This has helped to focus attention on a broad range of children who are not in school or may be marginalised within the education system.

Inclusive education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in both formal and non-formal educational settings. It advocates for changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, policies and strategies. At the heart of inclusive education is the vision to transform the education system so it can provide improved quality and worthwhile education for all learners. Our schools in Pacific Island countries can only be inclusive when they are working towards full participation and equality.

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1. United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation
This can be achieved by respect for differences, respect for different learning styles, variations in methods, open and flexible curricula and welcoming every child. In other words, inclusive schools are learner-centred and child-friendly. It is fitting to note that there are innovative pilot projects being conducted along these lines in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands through the support of UNICEF and in Samoa through UNESCO support.

It is inevitable that inclusive education is seen by many as being limited to providing education for children with disabilities in a regular school setting. However, educational partners are promoting a much broader view of inclusive education, one which encompasses all children who are excluded on grounds of gender, ability, ethnicity, language, geographic location and poverty. Getting all children into school is just the first step towards completing the primary level education cycle. In many countries, failure to increase retention rates and poor levels of achievement in low quality schooling environments continue to show that claims of improved access are insufficient as evidence of progress in the education system.

Inclusion may also be seen as a continuing process of increasing participation, and segregation as a recurring tendency to exclude difference. In this sense inclusion and segregation are not fixed states or educational placements. Schools are continually working towards inclusion and resisting segregation. They will find themselves at different stages, sometimes possibly taking wrong turns, on the road to inclusion.

Inclusive schooling implies that all children, regardless of the severity of their disability and the nature of their needs, should be taught in the regular class in the neighbourhood school (Jenkinson, 1997). Inclusive education is not synonymous with integration or mainstreaming, nor is it concerned only with the education of students with disabilities (Mittler, 1995). The philosophy underlying inclusive education is that schools have the responsibility to meet the needs of all children, and the teachers should be able to differentiate and adapt curriculum and instructional strategies to suit the differing needs and abilities of each child in the classroom (Jenkinson, 1997).

For inclusive education to become a reality in the Pacific we need to eliminate any continuum of service, including special education and special educators, as

2. United Nations Children’s Fund
a system of provision. This would require the redeployment of special education staff and resources to mainstream schools, where they will be employed not only for the benefit of students with disabilities but also in a supportive role across the whole curriculum. The inclusive schools movement should seek to enhance the social skills and community participation of people with severe disabilities, thereby changing the attitudes of both teachers and students towards disability.

We need to keep in mind that inclusive education brings together different forms of education. It is rights-focused and can be considered the ultimate educational outcome of the principle of normalisation. It begins with the premise that every individual has the right to participate in the mainstream of society and enjoy the same privileges, benefits and opportunities as his or her own peers. It is child-focused and founded on the principle that all children, regardless of disability, are capable of learning and should be given the same opportunities to achieve, through learning, to the best of their abilities.

Teachers who have taught in an inclusive classroom say the philosophy of inclusion hinges on helping students and teachers become better members of a community by creating new visions for communities and for schools (Jenkinson, 1997). It is about membership and belonging to a community and involves all kinds of practices that are ultimately practices of good teaching. These principles are generally consistent with the values on which many Pacific cultures are based. What our teachers in the Pacific should do is to think about children, develop ways to reach them all, and implement the values of inclusion as a way of providing more options for children. It requires structuring schools as communities where all children can learn. However, there is no recipe for becoming an inclusive teacher or an inclusive school. Inclusion is all about enlightenment, developing an awareness of the rights, aspirations and needs of those with disabilities, and of fostering good will towards them in the community generally—particularly in those who have traditionally had little or no contact with persons with disabilities.

Policy and practice

According to Wedell (1993) the degree of inclusion in each country has been determined by a large number of ideological policies, as well as by financial and conceptual factors. Its scope is limited by the amount of support available within individual schools. Mittler (1995) proposed that inclusion is, therefore, a challenge for schools, and requires a need for curriculum review in terms of access
for all children. While the philosophy of equitable education for all children relies on a movement towards greater inclusion of students with a disability in regular schools, there appears to be a gap between such a policy and its practice (Joachim, 1998). In contrast to findings which suggest that there is a trend towards inclusion of students in regular schools in recent years (Bauer & Shea, 1989), the proportion of students being segregated as opposed to integrated has been found by some researchers to be on the increase.

It has also been proposed that a change in emphasis from the rights perspective to one of outcomes might, in future, result in a return to more traditional placement policies for children with a disability (Ward, 1993). Inclusive educational practices have received varying degrees of commitment from educators in the international arena. Inclusive approaches have been advocated in Italy, Spain, Denmark, the United Kingdom, France and Sweden, whereas Germany and the Netherlands have taken a conservative segregated approach (Daunt, 1991). In the USA, the inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular schools has been endorsed, and the 1975 Public Law 94-142 has legalised the structure needed to implement the policy of integration.

We need to keep in mind that inclusive education is a process that involves students, teachers, parents, the school community and the local community. It involves learning and development for everyone who is part of the school community. It involves discussion, examination of relevant issues and decision-making based on the benefits for all concerned. These practices are also deeply rooted in Pacific cultures. Pacific cultures have a long and proud history of understanding that learning is about gaining knowledge and understanding of knowing what to do to sustain cultural continuity. Learning is practical and related to shared values and beliefs. In addition, relationships among people are core values in Pacific cultures. Relationships are important because they identify individuals and groups and provide a framework for working together. The roles that individuals play within their family and community assist in developing positive skills and social responsibility.

The process of inclusive education is a natural fit with Pacific culture. It reinforces the importance of working together to share information, to solve problems, to make decisions and to take action. The many roles and responsibilities played by the wide range of people involved in the education process will help ensure the continuing development of a healthy and vibrant school community.
The arguments for segregation

If we are going to be advocates of inclusive education we need to ask the question: Why segregate children with disabilities from the mainstream education system? Jenkinson (1997), when referring to this, mentions the advantages of segregation that are related not only to practical and economic measures, but also to the perceived effects on the education of children with disabilities. Disability does not exist in isolation. It implies that a person is disabled from undertaking, without assistance, certain activities that are part of the day to day life of most people. In the educational context, a disability implies that a student has special needs beyond those of the majority of students, which are not entirely met by the normal curriculum in the regular classroom, but may require some form of special education.

In the Pacific, education for students with disabilities has been provided in segregated schools or institutions often designed to cater for a specific category of disability. Many of these organisations originated from the practice of voluntary associations setting up their own schools to meet the special needs of these students. However, the practice has been maintained as governments have increasingly assumed responsibility for the education of these students. Several advantages were seen in segregated education for students with a disability. These advantages related not only to practical and economic factors in the provision of special education, but also to the perceived effects on the disabled and non-disabled children of educating both groups in segregated settings.

First, it is argued that, because children with specific disability are congregated together in one school, it is more economical to provide special instructional methods, aids and equipment seen as necessary for their education. Similarly, specialist staff can be concentrated in one area to serve the needs of a particular disability. In furthering this argument Jenkinson (1997) noted that this has enhanced the development of professional expertise in specialised areas of disability, such as hearing impairment or mental retardation. A further economy is achieved by the fact that ancillary services such as speech therapy and physiotherapy can be provided on the same premises, rather than being dispersed over schools covering a wide area or necessitating the withdrawal of a child from school to attend a specialist centre for treatment. Paramedical staff can often work in close collaboration with the educational team in the special school.
A second major advantage claimed for segregated education is that students with disabilities can benefit from the smaller classes in special schools or units. As a consequence, they can receive more attention, and instruction can be pitched at a level appropriate to their needs, rather than at a traditional age-grade level that caters for the majority of students. It is also argued that the segregated special school is more supportive and less threatening to students with disabilities than the regular school, and that students with disabilities will feel more secure among others with a similar disability. Finally, it is argued that placing students with disabilities in the regular school would disadvantage non-disabled students by making undue demands on teaching and other resources.

The movement towards inclusion

With this in mind we need to look at inclusive education and the need to reconsider and reform school curriculum in order to cater for all children, rather than the previous emphasis which focused on the need for the child with a disability to fit into the regular classroom. Terms such as normalisation, mainstreaming, integration, de-institutionalisation have been used to describe the practice of including children with disabilities in the regular classroom.

Inclusion incorporates the notion of social justice and considers the education of students with a disability to be an issue of equity, rather than simply one of placement. The movement towards inclusive rather than segregated education has resulted from considerable worldwide emphasis placed on the rights of all children, regardless of disability, to receive appropriate and equal educational opportunities. Since the 1960s, the emphasis has changed from one of protection of children’s rights to that of autonomy, and from a welfare perspective to one of justice.

In the past years there has been a considerable change in philosophies regarding children with disabilities. Jenkinson (1997) emphasises that this normalisation process is a physical and social inclusion of developmentally disabled individuals into the mainstream of community. From this emphasis, it seems that, although inclusion is based on the normalisation philosophy, it is more an ideological commitment than an empirically validated solution to educating students with special needs. It is providing for diverse groups of students within specialised curriculum areas, which requires a rethinking of educational philosophy.
Pacific education in flux

Education in the Pacific is in the midst of tremendous change brought about by the current review of systems and practices. It has now been faced with greater challenges, as skepticism towards education of children appears to be increasing, with higher demands from Pacific citizens for higher academic standards and greater accountability for improving educational performance. At the same time it is hampered by insufficient funding, overburdened teachers, low salary scales and the persistence of outdated instructional approaches. Though there are signs of development and change, its direction is still uncertain in the sense of policies for all of those who have the fundamental right to receive good quality education.

The needs of children with disabilities

Among all these issues, people are still asking the question: Where do students with disabilities fit into the picture? The Special Education Unit in Fiji’s Ministry of Education states that children with disabilities need the companionship of their age peers; they need the same experiences of achievement and opportunities to grow into adolescents and adults who have interesting and satisfying lives. Above all they need self-respect and a sense of belonging. To achieve this, these children need a great deal of support, often beyond that provided in most classrooms.

Who can make inclusion happen?

Apart from this, disability is a concept that usually arouses emotions in us. By the time a child reaches school age, many parents have become involved with an often-confusing range of services designed to address the needs of their son or daughter who has a disability. To their emotional strain may be added conflicting advice about educational options from a number of sources, some of whom have vested interests in perpetuating their own form of separate educational provision. In some countries there is no policy for special education and this is a hindrance to the development of the whole process. There seems to be a dilemma as to who should be involved and who has the authority to make things move according to the needs of this contemporary world of education.
the free tuition scheme for primary schools and per capita grants and remission of fees for secondary students. There is a high degree of community participation in the delivery of education services, which is a strength of the system that needs to be maintained. This involvement includes religious groups.

Change with reference to the importance of inclusion in the educational context is necessary. There are compelling arguments already in Pacific for a need to change from the current segregated setting to a more flexible, inclusive one. As seen in the literature on inclusive practices in developed countries such as the USA, England, Canada and Australia, inclusion is widely accepted and is flexible, giving people a chance to be educated equally without discrimination on the basis of disability. The literature clearly indicates the need for people with disabilities to be included in the regular education system in recognition of their value and human dignity.

For change to occur in Pacific countries, there is a need to draw from the literature discussed above which identifies the need for strategies to be formulated to influence key players in recognising the importance of inclusive education for individuals, families and society as a whole. We need to be encouraged to note that communities need to understand the importance of changing attitudes and values. They need to be aware of the rights of children with disabilities and those who are marginalised to have full participation and equality in education. It is important for the teachers’ unions to be aware of this and the changes that are expected for inclusive educational programmes. There is a need for governments through Ministries of Education to be informed via strategic advocacy programmes and policy development to support the introduction of inclusive education. There will surely be changes in the system and these are to be expected. Therefore Cabinet papers are to be formulated on the basis of positive advantages of inclusive educational practices.

This will allow for strategic and operational legislation that focuses on the full implementation of a policy of inclusive education for children with disabilities. All corporate plans for inclusion in the Pacific need to involve the areas of curriculum, teacher training, university education and peer attitudes in the planning. Such a policy would allow for a wider perspective of information and views on the issues concerning inclusive educational practices for children with disabilities.
References


