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Inclusive education in the Pacific: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract   The countries of the Pacific region are reforming their educational policies to include learners who have frequently been excluded from receiving any form of education. They face many challenges to include learners into their schooling systems. This article systematically identifies and reviews research and policy documents from the region and reports on seven most commonly reported barriers and challenges these countries have faced. It also identifies positive developments from the region that could guide future efforts to address challenges and barriers to inclusive education. The article concludes with four key recommendations for the future development of inclusive education in the region.

Keywords   Inclusive education · Educational reform · Pacific Islands

The 16 countries spread across the large Pacific Ocean to the east of Australia and the north of New Zealand are often known as Pacific Island countries. Hau'ofa (2008) argues that the Pacific islands countries are "a sea of islands", as opposed to islands in the "far end of the sea"(Hau'ofa 2008). The ocean does not separate them, the ocean connects them (Hau'ofa 2008). The countries of the region face many health, economic, environmental, educational, and social challenges, and they are committed to working together to address these challenges.

One such challenge is the education of learners with disabilities. Over 90 percent of learners with disabilities are outside the schooling system and do not have access to any form of education in the Pacific (Pacific Disability Forum 2012). In a recently published report, the secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) raised a major concern that persons with disabilities throughout the region continue to face stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. They are also disproportionately represented

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among the poor and unemployed (PIFS 2016). Lack of education and discrimination of people with disabilities in society are intertwined issues. Unless the countries start including learners with disabilities in regular schools, it is highly unlikely that adults with disabilities will be accepted and will become contributing members of society. The secretary general suggested, as a possible solution to this concern, the inclusion of learners with disabilities in schools and communities.

Disability is variously defined and understood within the Pacific countries. While most policy documents tend to use medical terms to define disability, there is some shift in recent years toward using moral and social models of disability (Picton, Horsely, and Knight 2016; Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016b). There is some criticism of medical definitions of disability in the region as they tend to reinforce stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors (Taufe'ulugaki 2001; Tufue-Dolgoy 2010). Some researchers from the region have emphasized the need to raise awareness through social reforms in the community so terms used to define disability have clear purpose, function, and suitability to the local context (Taufe'ulugaki 2001; Tufue-Dolgoy 2010). Picton et al. (2016, p. 19) state: "It has been widely acknowledged that there is a fundamental link between culture, language, and concepts of belonging and self-worth. In the absence of a shared understanding, both in conceptualization and terminology, marginalization for people with disability persists".

It is important to acknowledge that while many countries of the region have signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), access to education to people with disabilities in the countries of the region remains very low (Forlin et al. 2015). It shows that the signing and ratification of the international conventions is not sufficient to bring about changes at the ground level. Policy makers and regional bodies (such as the PIFS and the Pacific Disability Forum [PDF]) have recognized the urgent need to embrace inclusive education as a way to provide access to education to thousands of children with disabilities who are outside the school system (PDF 2012; PIFS 2016). Most countries of the region have drafted new policies or have modified their existing policies to support inclusive education. Detailed information about the policy reforms from the region is available elsewhere (Forlin, Sharma, Loreman, and Sprunt 2015; Sharma and Michael 2017). Despite several policy imperatives at national and regional levels not much progress has been made with regard to implementing inclusive education across the region (Forlin et al. 2015). The purpose of this article is to identify and highlight why little or no progress has been made and to identify barriers that countries have faced. A key focus of the article is also to report positive developments across the region.

Prior to getting into the discussion about barriers and solutions to inclusive education in the Pacific, it is important to acknowledge and recognize that Pacific culture is highly inclusive. People across the region live in small communities and are highly interconnected and interdependent. However, it is also important to recognize that there are differences in the way communities function across the region and one must be careful in overgeneralizing. Many authors from the region (LeFanu 2013; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Miles, Merumeru, and Lene 2014) have written about the colonial approach to inclusive education. They argue that inclusive education is imposed without paying attention to the local context and cultural values, and they have raised concerns that the voices of people from the region are not always heard when educational reforms (i.e., inclusive education) are being implemented. Paying no or little attention to this genuine concern raised by the key stakeholders from the region can create tension, confusion, and resistance to implementing any educational reform (Sharma et al. 2016a, b; Sharma, Forlin, Marella, and Jitoko 2017; Yates, Carrington, Gillete-Swan, and Pillay 2019).

There are three justifications provided to support implementation of inclusive education globally (UNESCO 2009). An educational justification is that all children, irrespective of their differences, should learn together and that inclusion benefits all children. A social justification suggests that inclusion is perhaps one of the easiest ways to change learner attitudes toward each other and create societies where everyone belongs, irrespective of their differences. An economic justification suggests that inclusive education is a cost-effective way to educate learners with disabilities. All three justifications are valid in the countries of the Pacific region, but they may not appeal a lot to the local stakeholders as there is hardly any local research to show if these justifications are also valid for the region. However, in the Pacific there are many local cultural practices and traditions as well as local research, albeit very little, that suggest inclusive education is possible in the region. For example, one common cultural practice used across the communities in the region is *Talanoa* (Picton et al. 2016). It literally means "to talk". Members of the community sit in circles and share their stories. Close connections among the members are nurtured and many important decisions are made. Interesting conversations occur where all members, irrespective of their abilities, participate. *Talanoa* is used in various forms across the region. This practice can provide foundation to many inclusive teaching practices that can facilitate inclusion of all learners. In this article I aim to report about many such practices as well as positive developments from the region.

Understanding the context

There is a common myth that most countries of the Pacific are alike. While there are some similarities, there are also stark differences in terms of the population, landmass area, languages spoken, and cultural practices. The countries are spread across a large region that covers around 15 percent of the earth's surface area (World Bank 2018). Three countries (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands) account for over 90 percent of the total population in the region (UNPF 2014). The populations of some countries and landmass areas are very small. For example, Niue and Tokelau have populations of 16,000 and 12,000 respectively and landmass areas of 259 and 12 square kilometers respectively (UNPF 2014). All the countries in the region are politically independent, although some have strong political associations with the USA (Palau, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia) and New Zealand (the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau). The region is exposed to the ill effects of climate change. Many countries across the region (e.g., Kiribati and the Marshall Islands) are witnessing unprecedented rises in sea levels not witnessed anywhere in the world and are at risk of going under water by 2050 (Storlazzi et al. 2018). The region is highly fragile, and it is frequently hit with natural calamities such as floods and cyclones. A substantial amount of funds is spent on a regular basis to recover from natural disasters. Despite their fragility, the countries of the region continue to prioritize education through national and regional reforms.

Realizing the lack of resources and adequate funding, the countries of the region have decided to cooperate with each other and have developed a regional educational strategy through the Pacific Framework for Regionalism. The education of children with disabilities is identified as a core priority by all countries in the region, and the PIFS coordinates the countries' efforts and develops regional strategies to implement. The ministers of education from all countries in the region are invited on an annual basis to develop policies and national action plans to address local challenges and meet the regional targets. For

example, the Pacific Regional Strategy on Disability (2011–2015) was developed in 2009 with a specific focus on supporting the implementation of inclusive education in the region (PIFS 2009). A key rationale behind developing the strategy was the concern that over 90 percent of children with disabilities did not have access to any form of education in the region. Evidence from many countries suggests that the number could be as high as 98 percent (Sharma 2012). Another significant initiative was undertaken by the ministers of education in 2014 when they tasked the PIFS to develop a regional framework on inclusive education to address barriers to the education of children with diverse abilities, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities. In 2019, the Pacific Regional Inclusive Education Framework was developed. The framework was largely influenced by local research and previous disability and inclusive-education policies, and it was endorsed by the Pacific education ministers (personal communication, Filipe Jitoko, November 2019).

Conceptual framework: Appreciative inquiry and strengths-based approach

This article is largely based on a systematic review of the literature from the region to identify positive developments. The key aspects of "appreciative inquiry" (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987) and "strengths-based approach" (Lopez and Louis 2009) guided the analysis. Rather than focusing and reporting on what is not working in the region, a key focus of the analysis was to identify and report on positive developments. Focusing on positive developments may be more appropriate in countries and regions where research on inclusive education is limited. Surprisingly, a large number of published papers on inclusive education from the countries of the South (or economically poor nations) tend to identify and report on what is not working in the countries rather than on what is working (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). It is easier to report on challenges; however, just reporting on challenges may not shift the field (or practices) forward. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers need models that have proven to be effective in the local contexts rather than learning about practices from other countries that may or may not be relevant to the local context.

Appreciative inquiry originated in the field of organizational change and leadership (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). It is based on the premise that knowledge is co-constructed through the interactions between individuals within a social system. A key underlying assumption is that every organization (in our case the countries of the Pacific) has something that is working well with regard to a change initiative (i.e. inclusive education reform), and organizations should focus on what is working. It is possible to bring about change in an organization by asking the right question through focusing on the strengths of the organization (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008). The correct questions could be key catalysts that initiate, drive and sustain positive change.

Closely related to appreciative inquiry, a strengths-based approach focuses on individuals rather than on organizations. It is widely used in the field of education (Lopez and Louis 2009). A strengths-based approach to education places emphasis on the positive aspects of individual students and celebrates the efforts made and achievements gained by them (Lopez and Louis 2009). This approach requires educators to shift their focus away from the deficits of an individual to the strengths of the individual when designing lesson plans and teaching them. Lopez and Louis (2009, p. 2) state that, "Strengths-based education begins with educators discovering what they do best and developing and applying their strengths as they help

students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence".

In this article, I have used the key tenets of the strengths-based approach to understand and examine approaches of school educators in the Pacific region. Rather than focusing on what they cannot do, the focus was on what educators can do and have already done with limited resources available to include learners with diverse abilities in the region.

In the past few years, a number of steps have been taken across the countries of the region which show that it is possible, albeit at a smaller scale, to implement inclusive education. In this article I aim to identify positive developments from the region that can guide the development of further inclusive practices in the region.

Systematic search for information

In order to identify relevant sources of information, I undertook a systematic search using the Scopus database. The search terms used to identify articles were: "inclusive education" and "Pacific". Through this search, I identified a total of 37 documents. I screened the abstracts of the 37 articles and discarded 24 articles. I discarded those articles either because they did not cover information about the Pacific countries (e.g., articles reporting developments in Australia and New Zealand) or because they provided information about aspects that were not relevant to the current review.

I conducted a secondary search to identify any other documents that did not appeared in the Scopus search by reviewing the bibliographies of the articles, websites, and policy statements identified through the Scopus search. This process allowed identification of further six articles (including policy documents) relevant to the current review. In total, 19 articles (identified by an asterisk in the reference list) were used for the analysis.

I reviewed the articles to identify key barriers and challenges reported across the studies. Some studies have reported how barriers and challenges could be addressed. In this article I only report on barriers and challenges that clearly stand out and that are frequently reported in the peer-reviewed papers and policy documents. Having participated in a number of inclusive-education projects across the region, I was aware of some policy initiatives and case studies relevant to the present review. Information from such sources was also incorporated in the analysis. I acknowledge that the approach used to identify barriers and strategies is not highly systematic. However, I do believe that use of a semi-systematic approach is appropriate in countries and regions that are just beginning to implement educational reforms.

Results and discussion

I identified seven challenges and barriers in the articles reviewed. Each challenge is described as a question or concern that stakeholders in the region have faced. Examples of strategies and approaches that have worked in one or more Pacific countries are presented to describe positive developments in the region.

What is inclusion?

Inclusion is a complex concept. Some local researchers (e.g., Merumeru, LeFanu, Lene, and Tufue-Dolgoy) have argued that there is confusion about what inclusion is and what form of inclusion can work in the Pacific (Miles et al. 2014). The lack of conceptual clarity inhibits progress of the countries in educating disadvantaged learners. While most policy makers adopt international definitions, and they may make sense to them, these definitions have little practical relevance to school educators (Miles et al. 2014). Clearly, there is a need for a definition that is easy to understand and that is widely accepted by the countries of the region. While "inclusive education" originally focused on including students with disabilities in regular schools, it has more recently come to refer to education systems, processes, and practices that focus on the inclusion of a range of commonly excluded and at-risk groups, such as girls, indigenous, rural and remote children, child workers, street children, or ethnic minorities, among other potentially marginalized groups. Drawing heavily on the rights outlined in the UN CRPD, Article 24, and contributions from colleagues in the Pacific, Sharma, Forlin, Marella, Sprunt, and Deppeler (2016a, p. 9) defined inclusive education as:

> the means by which the rights of children and youth with disabilities to education are upheld at all levels within the general education system, on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live. It involves identifying and overcoming barriers to quality education in the general education system; reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements; and provision of support measures to facilitate access to and participation in effective quality education.

It is important to acknowledge that while policy makers at national and regional levels need to have a consensus on a common definition, the countries also need to invest their resources to make sure that implementers of national and regional policies (e.g., school educators and teacher educators) also understand the true intent of the definition. We do not need two definitions of inclusive education—one for policy makers and one for implementers/educators. Rather, the countries do need to invest (e.g., design professional learning programs) in ensuring that all educators have a common understanding about the concept. There are some positive developments in this regard. For example, policy documents of countries like Cook Islands (Cook Islands Ministry of Education 2010) have defined inclusive education that not only makes sense to policy makers; it also is meaningful to school educators. The policy recognizes that

> Inclusive Education is a process of change. It encourages schools and learning institutions and all Educational Stakeholders to reflect on their policy and practices to ensure that they promote Inclusivity (a way of living where everyone feels that they belong). Within this process, schools will need to make changes in order to recognise the diversity and different educational needs that ALL children as well as all members of the school community bring with them to a school setting.

> (Cook Islands Ministry of Education 2010, p. 9)

More efforts need to be made by other countries in the region to redefine inclusion and to ensure that all educators have a common understanding about the concept. It will be critical to engage Pacific stakeholders as attempts are made to conceptualize inclusive education so that they own the agenda and have a Pacific flavor to the definition.

"Why should we bother about inclusion? It is driven by external agencies"

A number of authors from the region have raised concerns that inclusion initiatives are largely driven by foreign agencies. For example, Le Fanu (2013, p. 139) states that "international development agencies exploit their positions of power and influence within the new global order to promote the uncritical international transfer of Western educational policy and practice to low income countries". Similarly, Armstrong et al. (2010, p. x) raised the concern that very often "education policy is 'grown' in the developed world and then later exported to developing countries". But in each case the local context of policy and practice allows us to examine the particular pressures for change within national [and in this case Pacific region] education systems and the tensions that they can give rise to nationally and internationally. Other researchers (e.g., Tufue-Dolgoy 2010; Yates et al. 2019) are concerned that often funding agencies and international organizations could impose policies and practices that do not always align well with the local cultural values. For example, in most Western countries, whenever we refer to inclusion initiatives, we tend to put the child at the center of the initiatives. This notion could be problematic in the Pacific. The family and the child are inseparable, and the focus of any policy initiative should be the family first and the child second. Justifying inclusive education because a child has a right to education could create unnecessary tensions.

There are some positive developments in the region that show how best to address these genuine concerns raised by the Pacific stakeholders (Sharma et al. 2016a, b). A large team of Pacific and international researchers collaborated in a project to develop Pacific Indicators for Inclusive Education. The project was undertaken in four countries of the Pacific (Fiji, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu). A number of key principles guided the project, which allowed the Pacific stakeholders to own the project activities and project findings (Sharma et al. 2017; Sharma, Jitoko, Macanawai, and Forlin 2018). These key principles were "collaboration", "nothing about us, without us", and "a need for a system change". The first principle of collaboration was enacted by codesigning and co-delivering the project activities with two regional bodies (the PIFS and the PDF). The project partners from the two organizations were also involved in recruiting and training in-country researchers. They also worked closely with in-country researchers from the four countries for data collection. The data was co-analyzed by the Pacific researchers with support from international researchers from Australia and other countries.

The second principle, "a need for system change", guided the team throughout the project. Rather than the international team imposing their views, the whole team worked together in identifying what practices may have created barriers to the participation of students with disabilities in schools and developed indicators that could provide guidance in addressing the system level barriers. The team was aware of keeping the Pacific context in mind when developing inclusive education indicators.

The last principle, "nothing about us, without us", was perhaps the most critical for this project and should ideally be a cornerstone of any research conducted in the region. Voices of people with disability and people from the Pacific guided all project activities. For example, two researchers from each of the case-study countries collected and analyzed the data. One of the two researchers was a person with a disability nominated by the local Disability People Organization. The other researcher was someone who had extensive experience of working in the disability and education sector. Both these researchers were provided training to collect and analyze data. They participated

in all relevant meetings related to identification and development of the indicators. The project leaders made sure that Pacific voices were captured in the development of the indicators by having all data collected by Pacific research partners. If the local researchers did not believe that an indicator was relevant to their country or the Pacific, then that indicator was deleted. The researchers from each of the participating countries were supported in writing the case studies documenting the stories of parents, educators, and ministerial officials (See sample case studies at https://www.monash.edu/education/research/projects/pacific-indie). Key findings from the project were subsequently used in the development of the Pacific Regional Framework for Inclusive Education, demonstrating the wider acceptance of project findings by key decision-makers in the region.

"Policies tell us what to do, but not how to do it"

Most countries in the region have a national policy on education of children with disabilities (Forlin et al. 2015). A close examination of the policy documents from the region suggested that most countries have prioritized inclusive education as a means to provide education to children with disabilities. Concerns have been raised by local researchers that most of these policies are driven by external agencies and they tend to disregard local culture and values (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013). Most policies are largely based on the medical paradigm or deficit view of disability, and they tend to support segregation (Forlin et al. 2015). Clearly, policies of some countries may have overcomplicated the inclusion initiatives of the countries. In our review of policies (Forlin et al. 2015), we found that policies failed to document how inclusive education can be achieved in a country.

It is important to highlight that the policies of some countries are outliers in a positive way and could be useful for other countries in the region as they start developing their own policies. A classic example of such a positive policy was developed by the Cook Islands as early as 2010. The policy includes most of the key components that can enhance the ownership of the policy directives by the local stakeholders. For example, the policy (Cook Islands Ministry of Education 2010, p. 6) states:

> It is critically important that our programs and curriculum delivery in schools reflect quality, equity, efficiency, partnership, relevancy, sustainability and excellence. Inclusive Education recognizes the inclusivity of all learners, where ALL are valued and truly belong. To this end, it is critically important that we all engage collaboratively in a re-thinking and reconceptualization process to ensure that access to equitable and quality opportunities produces success and excellent for all learners.

The policy was developed by engaging local stakeholders from the Cook Islands. It captured the voices of heads and representatives of various community groups and education stakeholders. The policy also made an attempt to shift away from a medical or deficit view of disability by defining students with special learning needs as:

> Those students who for various reasons [author emphasis] are not developing to their full educational potential or are at risk of not achieving the major achievement objectives of the Cook Islands Curriculum. This refers to those students who are at risk of underachieving including those with specific learning and behavioural difficulties as well as those gifted and talented students who are not realising their potential.

Other countries in the region in the past few years have also revised their policies by engaging local stakeholders (e.g., the Solomon Islands; Sharma 2012), and it is possible that in a short time the revised policies from the region will have fully incorporated Pacific voices and will be sensitive to the local context. Vanuatu has developed an action plan to implement inclusive-education policy. The Inclusive Education Policy and Strategic Plan (2010–2020) provides extensive guidelines. It identifies a range of outcomes that the country uses in monitoring its progress to implement inclusive education (Government of Vanuatu 2011). Efforts by the regional bodies such as the PIFS and PDF in supporting countries to develop their national policies is and will remain of paramount importance.

"Lack of local inclusive education models"

Pacific educators and policy makers often find it hard to implement inclusive practices in the region. Some of the common barriers identified by the Pacific stakeholders include lack of understanding about the concept, lack of willingness of educators, lack of adequate skills in the teaching workforce, and a lack of resources to support implementation of inclusive practices in schools (Sharma et al. 2016a, b). The barriers identified by the people in the Pacific are surprisingly very similar to the barriers reported by educators in other countries. However, the strategies to address the barriers from other countries may not be appropriate for the Pacific context. It is important that local models of inclusive education are developed and showcased to educators from the region.

There are some positive developments in the region that could guide how best school educators can create inclusive schools. In 2011, the Fijian ministry of education commenced the Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP) with the financial support of the Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Aid 2015). The project lasted five years (2011–2016). A key objective of the project was to build the capacity of five pilot schools from the country to include students with disabilities in their proximity. The schools were provided ongoing professional education and mentoring to use context-relevant inclusive practices. The content of the professional education program was developed by a team of Australian and Pacific educators, taking into account the local context. The project was evaluated annually. There were many positive outcomes of the project. For example, student numeracy and literacy outcomes in the participating schools improved. Positive changes were also noticed in school educators' willingness and knowledge to include students with learning difficulties. A 2015 evaluation report (Australian Aid 2015, p. 8) stated that:

> AQEP has also been successful in shaping the local education context, to the benefit of not just the AQEP schools, in a number of areas. For example, AQEP's work to strengthen inclusive education has resulted in change at both the ministry and school levels. AQEP's five Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools are providing a model for inclusive education that the Ministry of Education is learning from as it initiates its own cluster school approach to inclusive education.

The pilot schools are a significant resource for school educators from Fiji. They can be used as demonstration sites where educators from other schools could be placed for a short duration to learn about challenges that most local schools face in educating learners with difficulties and also about context-sensitive strategies that they can use to address the challenges. In the past few years, visits of educators from other Pacific countries (e.g., Vanuatu) have been organized to provide opportunities to them to learn about inclusive-education

practices used by schools. The impact of such exposure could be significant as educators learn about strategies that could be easily adopted in their context. There is generally more acceptance among Pacific educators to learn about strategies from colleagues in other Pacific countries rather than to visit schools in countries (e.g., Australia, Canada) which have nothing in common with their own context.

"How do we decide where to start and how should we monitor our inclusive education efforts?"

One major difficulty that most Pacific countries face with the implementation of inclusive education relates to deciding where to start and how to determine if they are making any progress. Most Pacific countries do not fare very well on international monitoring parameters (e.g., sustainable development goals or millennium development goals) and could be at significant disadvantage when they are compared on parameters developed and employed in other countries.

A need to develop indicators that are sensitive to local context was thus raised by regional organizations such as the PIFS and the PDF as well as the ministries of education from the region. The Pacific Indicators for Disability Inclusive Education (Pacific-INDIE) were produced in response to this need, using a bottom-up approach where the voices of Pacific Islanders guided the whole project. A total of 48 indicators were produced that cover 10 key dimensions (Sharma et al. 2018). These are: (1) policy and legislation; (2) awareness; (3) education, training and continuing professional development; (4) presence and achievement; (5) physical environment and transport; (6) identification, (7) early intervention and services; (8) collaboration and shared responsibility; (9) curriculum and assessment practices; and (10) transition pathways. A most significant outcome of the project was the selection of 12 indicators as critical and mandatory for all countries by the PIFS. The 12 indicators are spread across all 10 dimensions. The indicators include a detailed manual (developed with contributions by the Pacific researchers) about how to use indicators in determining the progress of the countries, schools, and systems and also provide practical tools/strategies to achieve their set targets. Many countries (e.g., Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands) continue to use the indicators as guiding tools to identify suitable activities for their contexts.

"Workforce is not ready"

Lack of understanding about how to teach in inclusive schools is a paramount concern identified by policy makers, educators, and researchers in the region (LeFanu 2013; Forlin et al. 2015). Pillay et al. (2015, p. 9) state that:

> While there is an abundance of empathy among teachers and the community, there is a lack of knowledge and skills of how to teach children with disabilities. Recent investments in teacher training duplicate rather than leverage existing efforts in the form of recognised culturally sensitive providers, particularly when the demand may be high to start but will remain huge.

The problem of inadequate teacher readiness to teach in an inclusive classroom is generally seen to have two dimensions. First, preservice teachers do not learn enough about

inclusive education during the teacher-education programs. Second, there are hardly any professional-educational programs that adequately prepare in-service educators to teach in inclusive classrooms. A third aspect that is rarely talked about in the region is what Pacific educators should learn about inclusion. All three aspects need to be given adequate attention if we wish to empower the educators in the region to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Preparing preservice teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms requires all teacher educators to have a common understanding about inclusion. Content about inclusion is not taught by one academic, but it becomes the responsibility of all teacher educators in the program. A project where all teacher educators were empowered to teach about inclusion was undertaken by the Solomon Islands National University (SINU) (Sharma et al. 2015). The teacher educators from SINU worked with a university in Australia over three years to learn about ways they could incorporate content about inclusion in all teacher-education subjects. A key focus of the project was preparing teachers with the "heart" (commitment to include all learners), "head" (knowledge and skills to include all learners), and "hands" (ability to practice inclusion in real classroom) of inclusive educators. Initially all teacher educators from SINU visited the partner Australian university and learned about the model in the first week and spent the next two weeks brainstorming the content that could be incorporated in the university curriculum. On their return, the teacher educators from the Solomon Islands made the necessary changes to their program. The team also conducted projects in the Solomon Islands to build the capacity of local schools to become inclusive of learners with diverse abilities. Initial evaluations of the teacher-education project showed positive outcomes in preservice teachers' readiness to teach in inclusive classrooms.

A large project demonstrating how the capability of in-service teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms could be enhanced in the Pacific was undertaken by Carrington and Duke (2014). They adapted the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow 2011) collaborating with Pacific researchers from four countries in the region as a tool to create inclusive schools. Carrington and Duke (2014) were aware of the concerns of the Pacific researchers (e.g., Armstrong et al. 2010; LeFanu 2013) against the use of the Index in the region as they initiated their project. Armstrong et al. (2010), for example, argued that the Index imposes Western ways of doing inclusion in the Pacific countries. They also argued that the Index is formulaic in nature and that inclusive education should not be driven with formulas. Carrington and Duke acknowledged the concerns and modified the Index, working in partnership with the local researchers and educators to enhance its cultural sensitivity. The adapted Index continues to be used in countries in the region (more specifically in Vanuatu, Fiji, and Samoa) and is found to be a useful resource to build the capabilities of school educators to include learners with a range of diversities by creating inclusive schools and communities (Tones et al. 2017).

The third dimension that relates to the content of inclusive teacher-education programs must recognize the value of the Pacific system. There are some significant strengths of the Pacific system which are not always captured in teacher-education curricula across the region (Sharma et al. 2016a, b). Incorporating Pacific values and practices in teacher-education curricula has the potential to dramatically shift the teaching practice of all teachers and may result in better outcomes for all Pacific learners. A classic example of what most teachers need to learn is presented in the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2018) Tapasā Cultural Competency Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners. The framework is grounded on the belief that skilled and confident teachers are important for improved learning outcomes of all Pacific learners. The two key principles of the framework recognize that teachers are successful in teaching Pacific learners (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2018, p. 3):

(a) when they recognize and build on what Pacific learners, their parents, their communities already understand and value and what they know; and

(b) integrate these understandings, values and knowledge into their planning and teaching practices.

The Tapasā framework allows the teacher to bring Pacific perspectives to effective and quality teaching practices at different stages of student learning. There are also several other local practices that are closely aligned to inclusive teaching strategies (e.g., cooperative learning and peer tutoring). It is possible that most Pacific educators would be able to relate well to these practices and more inclined to use them in their classrooms. Use of local practices that are relevant to the learner allows them to participate actively and enjoy success. Isn't that what most inclusive teachers need to do? If we could ensure that all teacher-education programs across the Pacific made such a framework as a key foundation to the program not only will learners with disabilities benefit, but all learners will benefit. Moreover, teachers would find the information more appealing and contextually relevant and sensitive.

"How can we implement inclusion in our schools? We do not have enough resources"

A common and genuine concern raised by educators, parents, and people with disabilities across the region relates to a lack of resources to implement inclusive education (Sharma and Michael 2017). Some of the major issues that educators have raised relate to a lack of equipment for learners with visual impairment or hearing impairments. Students with visual impairment require access to textbooks in Braille or audio format. Students with hearing impairment require hearing aids or classroom technology (e.g., a microphone system also known as an FM system) that can allow access to auditory information. While some students with visual and hearing impairments do get access to technology in urban cities, mainly in special schools in the region, most students with hearing impairment and visual impairment residing in remote areas do not have access to such technology and material. Special schools cannot meet the demand and are not a cost-effective way to reach the wider population.

Tones et al. (2017) undertook a project in Fiji that might provide some guidance about how we can make best use of resources such as special schools in the region to support inclusive schooling. The study examined how special schools in Fiji were collaborating with regular schools in supporting students with a range of special educational needs. The study identified several practices used by special schools that supported regular schools. For example, one special school developed a transition plan for students with vision impairment so that they can be fully integrated in regular schools. Teachers from special schools visited regular schools to support integration programs. Practices of this nature where special and regular schools could collaborate are needed across the region. While there may not be enough funds to open new special schools; existing special schools could be transformed into resource centers.

The presence of regional bodies such as the PIFS and the PDF and the high level of cooperation among the countries in the region provides a unique opportunity for countries to make the best use of existing resources. Rather than each country opening new special schools or resource centers, the regional bodies could assist countries in pooling their

resources so regional resource centers are established across the region. It would assist in reducing unnecessary duplication of resources and make best use of the available funds and would further boost collaboration across the countries.

Conclusion

In this article I argue that the countries of the Pacific region face several challenges/barriers that continue to hamper the progress of these countries in regard to implementing inclusive education. The barriers have ranged from as simple as lack of clarity about the concept of inclusive education to as complex as the lack of preparedness of the workforce to teach in inclusive classrooms. Addressing the barriers to implement inclusive education requires the countries to adopt innovative and indigenous approaches (e.g., using Talanoa as a teaching strategy in inclusive classrooms). Clearly, models of inclusive education that have worked in other countries are unlikely to be successful as most researchers, policy makers, and disability advocates from the region are skeptical about importing policies and solutions from other countries. Engaging Pacific stakeholders from the conception as authentic partners can yield better outcomes and can also enhance sustainability of the project activities beyond the project funding. I used a hybrid approach, combining aspects of appreciative inquiry and a strengths-based approach, for carefully identifying positive developments from the region. A review of the positive developments reported in this article as well as comments made by local researchers from the region (e.g., Hauʻofa, LeFanu, Tufue-Dolgoy, Merumeru, and Lene) allows me to develop some key recommendations that could guide any efforts to implement inclusive education.

First, the people from the Pacific should own the inclusive-education agenda. They should decide why inclusion is needed in the region and identify local solutions to the challenges they face. External agencies and funding bodies should be respectful when working across the region. They need to co-investigate, codesign and co-evaluate Pacific efforts to implement inclusive education.

Second, Pacific culture and values should form the core foundation of inclusive-education policies and practices across the region. Inclusion can and should be done in the Pacific way in the region. Pacific countries have rich cultures, and many local practices in the region (Talanoa, Tapasā framework for specific practices) when applied in classrooms can make inclusion a real possibility for all children not just those with a disability. Most Pacific stakeholders will be receptive and responsive when indigenous cultural practices are acknowledged and used to create inclusive classrooms. Teacher-education programs across the region may consider designing new courses such as "Pacific practices to include learners with diverse abilities". It is possible that countries of the Global North could learn about new ways to implement inclusion from the community practices used for many decades in the Pacific.

Third, collaboration across and within countries should be a core foundation as the countries move to implement inclusive education. The countries from the region can collaborate with each other in learning about the challenges they face and then identifying practical solutions that can be used within their contexts. Regional bodies such as the PIFS and the PDF can play an instrumental role in supporting countries to collaborate. It is important to highlight that the countries need to understand inclusive education is not just education of children with disability, it is a means to provide high-quality education to all children. It is also a means to address discrimination of people with disability in society.

Last, the countries need to be supported to make the best use of available resources. Inclusive education is a resource-intensive activity. Some of the countries of the region are among the poorest in the world and may decide not to allocate any resources to inclusive education. The countries need to be creative resource finders and work with each other in implementing inclusive education. In this regard, regional universities such as the University of the South Pacific (USP) can play a very important role as it has overseas campuses in most of the countries in the region. The USP can start research projects identifying how resources from one country can be used to support inclusive education in one or more countries.

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