Entering the SDG era: What do Fijians prioritise as indicators of disability-inclusive education?

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Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' and the targets and indicators for SDG 4 emphasise the importance of measuring outcomes for children with disabilities (United Nations, 2015b). This paper reports on findings from qualitative research investigating Fijian stakeholders' priorities for measuring success of efforts within a contextually and culturally meaningful process of disability-inclusive education; that is, achievement of SDG 4 for children with disabilities. The priorities are presented in light of the specific challenges in Fiji to fulfilling this goal. The research presented in this paper is one part of a much larger mixed method study funded by the Australian aid program that aimed to develop and test indicators for the education of children with disabilities in the Pacific (Sharma et al., 2016). Fijian researchers with lived experience of disability undertook key informant interviews and focus group discussions with 28 participants. The findings include the need for or role of: an implementation plan and resourcing to ensure the national inclusive education policy is activated; improved awareness and attitudes; competent, confident and compassionate teachers; disability-specific services and assistive technology; accessible buildings and transport; and the important role of special schools. Inclusive education reform requires that Fiji incorporates and builds on existing strengths in special and inclusive education to ensure that systems and people are prepared and resourced for inclusion. The paper concludes that targets within SDG 4 are compatible with priorities within Fiji, however additional indicators are required to measure locally-prioritized changes related to barriers which need to be addressed if Fiji is to make progress towards the higher-order targets of SDG 4.

Keywords: Disability-inclusive education; Fiji; Disability Indicators; Sustainable Development Goals; Barriers

Introduction and context to the study

This paper seeks to give voice to Fijian stakeholders in identifying their priorities for

measuring success of efforts (indicators) within a contextually and culturally meaningful process of disability-inclusive education. The research presented in this paper is part of a larger mixed method study to develop Pacific indicators of disability-inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2016).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) charges States with ensuring that 'persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live' (United Nations, 2006). Global momentum to achieve access to a quality education for children with disabilities has steadily grown (UNESCO & World Education Forum, 2015) and most recently this objective has been embraced within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations, 2015b).

The focused nature of the previous development era, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), achieved extraordinarily positive outcomes in relation to most of the targets (United Nations, 2015a) but undoubtedly limited the scope of international development efforts (Waage et al., 2010). Against a backdrop of global failure to concentrate on people with disabilities throughout the MDG era, there was a strong international outcry. Disabled people's organisations, alongside other agencies, lobbied to ensure that people with disabilities would be included from now on (IDA & IDDC, 2012). These efforts were largely successful and disability is represented in a number of the SDGs and indicators. SDG 4 seeks to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Target 4.1 aims at access for all girls and boys to free, equitable and quality primary and secondary schooling; target 4.2 focuses on early childhood development and education for all children; and target 4.5 seeks equal access to all levels of education for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities. Over and above these targets, disability disaggregation is required for all education indicators, to the extent possible, in order to measure progress for each target.

The roadmap to achieve the 10 targets of SDG 4 is the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO & World Education Forum, 2015), adopted by 184 countries in November 2015. Strategies specified in the roadmap include: identifying and eliminating barriers that exclude vulnerable children and youth; developing indicators to measure progress towards equality; collecting better quality data on children with disabilities; and using data to inform policy and programming. These strategies underscore the need to consider each setting with a cultural and contextual lens as an important element in policy development and programming, highlighting the importance of research efforts such as those undertaken in Fiji in this study.

The complexity of achieving access to quality education, that is, realising SDG 4 for children with disabilities in low and middle income countries has been documented by many authors. In brief, some of the issues include: weak, or lack of education policies or implementation

plans that support education of children with disabilities (Grimes et al., 2011; Modern et al., 2010); insufficient budgets for inclusion programs (Bi and Roberts, 2011; Grimes et al., 2015); inflexible curricula and assessment policies (Forlin, 2013; UNESCO, 2004); untrained and unsupported teachers (Adioetomo et al., 2014; Howgego et al., 2014); difficulty in physical access, including transportation (Grech, 2014); non-supportive attitudes among teachers, communities, families and non-disabled peers (Ocloo and Subbey, 2008; Van Kraayenoord, 2007); the need for specialist services including diagnosis and treatment, assistive devices, medication, specialist teachers and assistants (Grimes et al., 2015) and poverty (Grech, 2014; Zuurmond et al., 2014). Literature indicates that many of these issues are also experienced as barriers in the Pacific region (Faamanatu-Eteuati, 2011; Le Fanu, 2010; Miles et al., 2014; Sharma et al., 2017; Tavola and Whippy, 2010).

Despite an apparent commonality in barriers across countries, many researchers and practitioners have rightly cautioned against assumptions that the form of inclusive education (IE) practiced in one country setting must, or even can, be implemented effectively in other country settings, particularly in relation to transferring western policies to low income countries (Grech, 2011; Kalyanpur, 2014; Schuelka and Johnstone, 2015; Thomas, 2013; Urwick and Elliott, 2010). Artiles and Dyson (2005:38) highlighted the contrast between the pathway towards inclusive education (IE) in Western countries, in which 'well resourced segregated forms of special education are being merged with equally well resourced regular education' with the reality in low-income countries where education systems are extremely poorly resourced, special education may only be fledgling, and teacher training institutions may lack capacity to sustain courses in special or inclusive education. These observations describe the situation in many Pacific countries and Pacific research similarly warns of difficulties with imported foreign ideologies and policies about IE (Duke et al., 2016; Le Fanu, 2013; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013).

One of the risks of the targets and indicators of SDG 4 relates to the maxim 'what gets measured gets done'. As happened in the MDG era, we must consider the risk that the emphasis of SDG targets and indicators may disproportionately direct and narrow education efforts of governments and partner donors by limiting the scope of programming to that which will show change against the targets. In the neighbouring Pacific country Samoa, Duke et al. (2016:1) highlighted the vital need for donors to respect the 'social and cultural values of countries that are receiving support to address global policies such as IE'. With the rollout of the SDGs, it is timely to investigate the possible effects of the SDG targets on the form of IE being promulgated.

Fiji context: disability and education

The Republic of Fiji has approximately 870,000 inhabitants across 106 islands (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Data on disability in Fiji is very limited. The most commonly

cited population prevalence figure is 1.4%, based on the national disability survey (FNCDP, 2010). Notably, the Fiji National Council on Disabled Persons 'believes that this figure could increase to 10 percent or more if all areas in the central eastern northern and western divisions in Fiji were surveyed' (17). The Fiji Islands Education Commission (2000) reported lower school attendance and progression to secondary school among people with disabilities than amongst non-disabled peers. The national disability survey reported that 41% of people with disabilities surveyed had not undertaken or completed education due to disability-related issues, including inaccessibility of the built environment, approaches to teaching and/or financial barriers (FNCDP, 2010).

Efforts to improve education for children with disabilities in Fiji have gained momentum over time and are likely to progress even further with the recent enactment of the Rights of People With Disabilities Bill 2016, and the ratification of the CRPD in March 2017. Fiji has 729 primary, 169 secondary and 17 special schools (15 primary, 2 post-primary) (Fiji MoE, 2013:2). Fiji's 2008-18 National Disability Policy called for the provision and review of 'special and inclusive education services and programmes for all children with special needs in schools, homes, communities, and hospitals' (FNCDP and Ministry of Health, 2008). Fiji has largely provided education to children with disabilities through special schools, along with a small selection of mainstream primary and secondary schools. In 2010, the Fiji government endorsed the Policy for the Effective Implementation of Special and Inclusive Education, reframing the focus towards inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, whilst continuing to strengthen and support existing special schools. Since then, the government, together with the Australian aid-funded Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP), have expanded IE by establishing it within an increasing number of primary schools (Sprunt, 2014).

In order to improve access to education for children with disabilities, policies and programs must be monitored and evaluated using carefully selected indicators. The requirement for, and potential influence of globally-mandated indicators, must be critiqued in light of local circumstances and priorities. The purpose of this paper is to report findings of qualitative research conducted to investigate Fijian stakeholders' priorities for measuring success of efforts (indicators) within a contextually and culturally meaningful process of disability-inclusive education. The priorities are presented in light of the specific challenges in Fiji to fulfilling SDG 4 for children with disabilities.

Methodology

The approach is aligned with emancipatory methodologies (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2012)- with people with disabilities participating in conceptualising the research, applying for funding, guiding the conduct of the research, data gathering, analysis and dissemination.

Qualitative research was undertaken using key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD). Discussion-based research has been shown to be culturally very useful in Fiji and more broadly in the Pacific (Otsuka, 2005; Vaioleti, 2006). Data was collected in Suva, Fiji, between September and December 2013 by two Fijian researchers with lived experience of disability. One investigator (female) is a staff member of the Fiji Disabled Persons Federation and the other investigator (male) has a background as a teacher and lectures in special education at a teacher training institution.

The project was approved by Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (CF13/2155 – 2013001120). The Ministry of Education selected primary schools and early childhood education settings with experience in IE, plus a number of special schools. Fiji Disabled Persons Federation (FDPF) invited parents of children with disabilities with experience in regular and/or special schools, and representatives from disabled persons' organisations (DPO).

KIIs were held with five people, including three senior officials in the Ministry of Education (MoE), one teacher educator and a senior official in a church organisation which runs schools across Fiji. FGDs were held with participants from four categories: i) DPOs (6 participants); ii) disability service providers including special schools (7 participants); iii) parents of children with disabilities (3 participants); and iv) primary and early childhood teachers (7 participants). All teachers had experience of teaching children with disabilities.

The KII and FGD question guides were developed in collaboration with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Disability Forum. Both guides included questions on: views on IE; the national policy on IE and its implementation; factors that would make IE successful; signs that would indicate quality education for children with disabilities; and challenges for implementing IE. The FGD also included an individual reflection activity. Thematic coding was used to analyse the data, then the first author and the two Fijian researchers met to discuss and interpret the findings.

Findings

Policy implementation

Participants generally agreed that the national Special and Inclusive Education Policy was an important foundation for changes to occur in Fiji and that the existence of the policy has influenced a number of schools to enrol children with disabilities. However, as has been found in a range of low and middle income countries (Grimes et al., 2015; PDF & PIFS, 2012), many participants felt that the policy needed an implementation plan in order to 'activate the policy':

[The policy] does not have any framework connected to the actual implementation process (DPO representative).

As it is, the policy is like a toothless tiger in the sense that it does not have a very good framework, which spells out clearly the implementation of IE in regular education institutions. For example, the policy on IE does not have any enforcement or compulsory decree for regular neighborhood schools in both urban and rural areas to enroll people with disabilities. (Key informant, teacher educator)

Interestingly, since data was collected for this study, the Fiji Ministry of Education has launched an updated version of the Policy (Fiji MoE, 2017), and the new Special and Inclusive Education Policy Implementation Plan 2017 – 2030, both supported through AQEP.

Educators and service providers identified the need for the government to undertake awareness programs to communicate the policy to School Management Committees, head teachers and principals, parents, teachers, members of the general community, and within the MoE itself. It was suggested that schools develop and implement school-level IE policies and plans, aligned with the national policy.

A range of issues were raised that would be needed in the policy implementation plan, outlined below.

Assessment

Participants agreed that there was limited access to tools, procedures or expertise to support appropriate assessment practices for students with disabilities. One MoE official described a situation where children with disabilities had achieved poor outcomes in the national literacy and numeracy assessment, resulting in some schools electing not to enable children with disabilities to sit the assessment the following year. A head teacher described how fortunate it was that there was not an exam hurdle requirement for graduating to the next grade, and that this was a positive factor in enabling IE. This is consistent with Faamanatu-Etuati's (2011:71) perspective in Samoa that the elimination of the national exam in Year 8 would 'see the increase in positive attitudes and approaches towards successful inclusion'. Both these comments reflect perhaps a disincentive for teachers to have children with disabilities in the classroom, with teacher promotion being linked to class assessment outcomes. Adioetomo et al's (2014) work in Indonesia reported a similar disincentive, with perceptions that children with disabilities would weaken schools' overall academic performance. Forlin (2013) reflects on the same tension faced by teachers in low, medium and high income countries; between inclusion on the one hand and the drive to achieve inflexible academic standards, frequently measured through exams on the other. The reality of efforts towards IE in Fiji, like other countries, is challenging; a reality in which resources and capacity to support IE, as well as procedures and supports for appropriate assessment practices, are insufficient at present.

Secondary and higher education

Participants acknowledged significant challenges in improving inclusion in secondary, tertiary and vocational education settings. These included: physical accessibility of buildings; teachers without skills in differentiating curricula; and sign language interpreters lacking maths and other subject-specific sign language. On the other hand, the University of the South Pacific was cited several times as a good example of an inclusive tertiary setting.

Early Childhood Education

Participants strongly voiced the need for disability-inclusive Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres to support successful inclusive schooling:

> Early childhood education should be addressed….Efforts should be made particularly at the very earliest age of the child's developing stages (DPO representative)

Monitoring and evaluating at the policy and individual levels

A range of participants, but particularly DPO representatives, discussed the importance of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the policy, implementation plan and current legal framework, as well as monitoring discrimination. A DPO representative argued for a monitoring and evaluation framework specific to each context, capable of distinguishing between disability types.

However a senior MoE official acknowledged the practical challenge of monitoring policy implementation when the Senior Education Officer (SEO) for special education is so busy raising awareness nationally, building capacity, and managing support for all special schools and inclusion schools:

> What is important is the monitoring (of the policy), and it will be the SEO Special Education who needs to play a lead role, but I think she will be challenged because she is one person that does a lot of other work. (MoE representative)

Teachers and service providers highlighted the need for better monitoring of individual children's progress to respond more effectively to learning needs. This is increasingly done with students with disabilities through the use of Individual Education Plans in special schools. However, this calls attention to a broader and longstanding problem in Fiji, where teacher-centredness dominates as the culture of teaching and learning (Koya, 2015; University of the South Pacific et al., 2016). This culture underlies a lack of awareness of the need for, and skills to meet children's needs through differentiation.

Resources required for implementing IE

Participants strongly agreed about the lack of financial and human resources to support wide-scale implementation of IE, which are problems identified globally (Grimes et al., 2015). Concerns included high student/teacher ratios compounded by a perception of additional work required for students with disabilities, exacerbating the situation of already overwhelmed teachers:

> The MoE does not seem ready to commit itself financially if extra manpower is needed in classrooms which enroll children with disabilities. …the government needs to come in more strongly and provide adequate financial support for the implementation of quality education in both special and regular schools. (Teacher educator)

Participants also highlighted the need for more human resources in the MoE itself, at central and district levels. A senior MoE official acknowledged that:

> We need to be stronger as a ministry…in terms of supporting the SEO because right now she is the only one who does all the work.

Participants argued for additional time for teaching to allow time for sign language interpretation, preparing materials for differentiated classroom activities, or providing remedial programs. Several participants reported the problem of regular schools referring children to special schools because those children were not keeping up academically or teachers did not have time to provide assistance. A key informant from the MoE admitted how:

> For the teacher it is easier to refer them to special school rather than giving that extra time.

A special school head teacher reported:

> I have heaps of challenges every year due to children being rejected from regular primary schools and secondary schools... While on one hand we are trying very hard to provide IE opportunities to all our children with disabilities (transitioning them to regular schools), on the other hand, special schools are receiving requests from regular schools (for children) to be enrolled. The MoE should do something about this immediately.

DPO representatives and teachers raised the issue of poverty and financial challenges faced by families of children with disabilities, including costs of school fees and transportation, and purchasing assistive technologies, medical or other services. One teacher described how 'some families come from a poor background; they do not have lunch when they come to

school, so they are better off staying at home rather than coming to school.' A teacher educator suggested that:

> Most families with disabilities come from very low socio-income bracket, so financial assistance should be made available to support transportation, lunch and other incidental expenditure.

A DPO representative described challenges in pushing for rights to education in the context of family poverty and questioned how long a poor family could sustain sending a child to school:

> The family will turn around and say 'who will pay for my family's food if I am committing a lot of funds for the rights of my child with disability to be enrolled at a regular school and attend consistently?'

Participants spoke about the need for funding to cover: assistive technologies including information technology, accessible infrastructure and transport, continence products, teacher aides, sign language interpreters, remedial education programs, costs of Brailling texts, notes and exams, and awareness programs.

As part of the policy implementation plan, participants felt there needed to be greater avenues for employment or income generation for people with disabilities, which would increase the value that parents placed on the education of their child with a disability:

> The family …will only spend a lot of money towards the education of their children if they know for sure that they will receive some return from the investment... In most cases, parents feel reluctant to invest in the education of their children with disability because of fear it will become a waste (DPO representative).

On the other hand, some participants felt that advocacy was required to educate Fijian society on the inherent right to education for children with disabilities so that families did not only value education if it led to employment. These findings are explored in the next section.

Awareness and Attitudes

Two barriers identified frequently related to lack of awareness of the right to, and poor attitudes towards the education for children with disabilities. Negative attitudes and stigma towards persons with disabilities were reported to be prevalent in the community, and were believed to result in many parents avoiding bringing their children with disabilities to school, as explained by this parent:

> Parents who have a disability in their family regard having a disability as a sin, a punishment from God and therefore it becomes a stigma; they feel shy to be seen by other parents when they bring their children to be enrolled, especially at regular schools…young people with disabilities remain at home and parents (are) not making an effort for them to go to school.

Participants emphasised that awareness programs should be targeted towards, and seek the involvement of, school management committees, faith based organisations (FBO), teachers, students in regular schools, families, the general community, government and media:

> This [IE] initiative will be very powerful if it is well designed. All forms of media outlet are to be involved so that what we need really sinks into the hearts of the public. All private and public organizations and groups should be involved in the awareness program. The people with disabilities themselves should be involved. (Parent)

These programs were seen as critical for improving parental engagement and support for schooling:

> We have invited parents to come to our school, and when they see other children with disabilities engrossed in learning activities, their mindset is changed. Next thing, we see them bringing in their child for enrolment. (Primary Teacher)

The findings highlight the critical need to raise awareness about the right to, and improve attitudes towards quality education for children with disabilities. This is supported by the findings of Howgego et al. (2014:39) in their comprehensive review of evidence for inclusive education which concluded that 'engagement with parents and local communities reduces stigma and discrimination and can improve enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes'. Strategies identified in this study to address awareness and attitudes include: (i) collaboration between the MoE and DPOs to plan information dissemination in partnership with media, government services (particularly early childhood and health services), primary and secondary schools, village and provincial councils and other community stakeholder groups, and the business sector; (ii) collaboration with faith based organisations and faith based education providers to increase their involvement in information dissemination, provision of resources to support education, and support to families; (iii) inclusion of rights and attitude related content in teacher education programs; (iv) parent information and engagement programs through schools; and (v) involvement of students and others in the communities with lived experience of disability.

Competent, confident and compassionate teachers

McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy (2013) underlined the challenges for IE in the Pacific due to untrained and unsupported teachers. Almost every participant in our study stressed that an increase in scale and quality of pre- and in- service teacher education for ECE, primary and secondary teachers, was critical to enabling successful implementation of IE:

> It seems that the MoE does not have capacity for large scale implementation of IE simply because the MoE does not have adequate trained teachers to provide the necessary support in the regular classroom. (DPO representative)

A primary teacher reflected:

> I suppose every school in the country is faced with the real challenge of teachers not being adequately prepared to deal with certain percentage of PWDs in the school. So there is a great need for the MoE to come up with a definite immediate plan on upgrading teachers with special education knowledge and skills.

Whilst one participant from the MoE stated that teacher education institutions do include special and inclusive education training in their programs, many other participants felt that this did not occur in all of the institutions, and/or that the quality of training could be improved by covering a greater spectrum and depth of information and skills. Practical experience in classrooms with children with disabilities was stressed by a number of teachers:

> The need for teachers to have some experience in teaching PWDs in special schools during the teacher training program is important… so that we are ready to face them when we are on our own. (Primary teacher)

The influence of teachers' attitudes towards IE was pivotal. Participants gave many examples of negative teacher attitudes, such as poor expectations of student learning capacity, also found elsewhere in the Pacific (Le Fanu, 2010; Tavola & Whippy, 2010), or exasperation with challenging behaviours. These contrast with findings demonstrating attitudes of love and pride related to students with disabilities. In response to one FGD participant's negative attitude towards having children with disabilities enrolled in her school, another participant responded:

> The first thing is your attitude as a teacher has to change. You need to develop a loving attitude towards all your children. It was different many years ago when you had to growl at the naughty children and make them sit at the corner for some time. … You have to change to loving the children. If you change, everything else will change. (Head teacher, IE school)

Forlin (2013:27) argues that 'teacher education is the epitome of establishing more effective and inclusive schooling for all learners'. She proposes that teacher education must focus on practical implementation, take into account the opinions of principals and teachers regarding approaches that are manageable and effective in the context; and be implemented by teacher educators who themselves have been upskilled. Our findings underline the relevance to Fiji of Forlin's remarks, and highlight the need for teacher education institutions to (re)establish good quality IE training that includes a focus on practical skills and positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion.

Disability-specific needs and services

Every FGD and KII highlighted the need for greater access to specialist services to enable successful inclusion of children with disabilities. A special school head teacher recognized that 'Our special education system lacks specialist personnel, for example speech pathologist, occupational therapist, psychologist in order to boost quality provision of IE.' Other specialist services required included: physiotherapy, audiology, Braille instructors and sign language interpreters. Improved communication with medical services was emphasized to improve diagnosis, services and information about children's needs:

> We have nurses coming into our schools to medically check our children, but we never receive any feedback from them…We should inform the medical authorities for every child in the school to receive medical feedback so we can identify who has got certain disabilities so we can attend to them in a special way. (Teacher)

Participants from all groups, but mainly educators and service providers, suggested that better assessment and/or diagnostic processes were required to identify children with disabilities in communities and schools, and to better understand individual children's educational support needs. This issue was linked to the need for specialist services for 'proper diagnosis', but also focused on building teachers' skills to identify children with disabilities and establish their learning support needs. The need for linkages between education, health and social welfare and families was highlighted several times in the study, which is consistent with the findings of Howzego et al (2014). Yousafzai et al (2014) highlight the importance of creating links between inclusive early childhood education and screening and early intervention programs, and this was a strong finding in our research, captured in part here by a teacher educator:

> Early education is an important component of learning for any child, including those with disabilities. Early intervention program should be strengthened in order to provide intensive early education and therapy so that much of their disability conditions can be…improved to enable enrolment in regular schools – to participate more effectively in the process of teaching and learning.

In their study of 30 young people with disabilities in India, Singal et al. (2011) reported benefits of children attending special school in the early years to develop disability-specific skills and then later attending mainstream schools to broaden their educational opportunities. This issue was raised often in our study, in terms of the skills that children may need in order to manage aspects of their impairment, and the importance of this skill development to enable IE. In particular, skills included sign language, management of hearing aids, Braille, use of screen reading software, orientation and mobility for children with vision impairment and mobility skills for children with mobility aids. This skill development was seen as available in Fiji within early intervention programs, special schools and therapy, and the idea of enrolling children in regular schools without these skills was seen as problematic:

> (It) would not be fair if special needs children are pushed into a regular classroom without the pre-requisite knowledge…The child has to go through intensive early intervention program…prior to enrolling the deaf or blind or intellectually disabled child into a regular school. (Teacher educator)

> For deaf children, first to go to the special school to have sign language training, and then enrolment in regular school with sign language interpreters. Some schools don't have interpreters so this wouldn't work. It depends on the child – if there's an interpreter in the school, she or he can go there, but it really should be the child's choice. (Deaf teacher in a school for the deaf)

Accessible buildings & transport

The problem caused by inaccessible school buildings and transport has been stressed globally (Howzego et al, 2014) and within the Pacific (Forlin, 2015; MoE Vanuatu, 2012). Not surprisingly, it was raised in all FGDs and interviews in our study. Many participants highlighted the need for government funding for infrastructural works, pointing out that only private and church schools enrol students with disabilities at the secondary level, and that government schools need to intensify efforts towards this:

> The government should now seriously think about providing additional (school) grants for the purpose of accessibility and other vital education assistive device rather than building one secondary school for the people with disabilities. (Parent of a child with disability)

Conversely, the head teacher of an IE demonstration school felt that accessible infrastructure need not be seen as such a complex issue:

> When we talk about user friendly schools, nearly all primary and high schools are user friendly. For example, if you are enrolling a student in the wheelchair in form 4,

the wheelchair does not have to climb the stairs. The Principal and head teachers need to use common sense. If all form 4 strands are upstairs, maybe the one which has the wheelchair student should move to the ground floor. All you need is to enlarge the toilets to fit the wheelchair and buy a bag of cement to build up the ramp for the wheelchair to come into the bottom floor classroom.

Accessible education infrastructure has been largely ignored in the majority of Fijian schools, perhaps as they are predominantly community-owned not government-owned. However, the aid project AQEP has brought a greater level of consideration and action for accessibility within its infrastructure program, and the MoE budget under the current government creates scope and flexibility for schools to access funding for accessibility (Reddy, 2017). In addition, with the recent CRPD ratification and disability bill enactment, there is cause for optimism regarding the future of accessible infrastructure.

The important role of special schools

Special schools have played a vital role in the education of children with disabilities in Fiji since the first one was established in 1967 (Merumeru, 2006), and their important ongoing function was supported by the findings of this research. The consensus among participants was that the majority of children with disabilities in Fiji do not attend school, but of those who do, a large majority are enrolled in special schools. Using 2017 enrolment data matched with the most recent population census data (2007), 0.52% of the population aged 5-19 years are children with disabilities in schools. There are 1,107 children enrolled across the 17 special schools and an additional 132 children with disability reportedly enrolled in mainstream schools. There is no reliable data on the prevalence of disability amongst children in Fiji, and figures globally vary widely (WHO and World Bank, 2011). However, using the debateable but conservative global estimate of 5.1% prevalence of children 0-14 years with moderate to severe disability (WHO, 2008), this would imply that the vast majority of children with disabilities in Fiji are indeed out of school, and of those in school, the bulk are mainly catered for by special schools.

Howgego et al. (2014) underscored the importance of special schools for children with high support needs, and our findings support this:

> I guess for partial, moderate and severe disabilities, (the children) may enrol at regular schools, but for the severe and profound intellectual developmental disability individuals they may at best remain at special schools until special support and assistance are provided for them to be enrolled at regular schools. (Teacher educator)

The expertise developed by special schools was seen as important in supporting the expansion of IE, and staff of some special schools and IE demonstration schools indicated

willingness to share their skills and experience with other schools and teacher trainees:

> Now that we have some training and experience in teaching most types of disabilities we feel we can go out and help certain children who may face similar learning problems in other schools. (Head Teacher, IE school)

Conversely, a senior MoE key informant voiced her concern about the quality of teaching by some teachers in special schools and reported that some teachers are not fully qualified. Despite these reservations about the capacity of some teachers, the special schools, along with a small number of IE demonstration schools, have become the predominant locus of expertise and experience in education of children with disabilities in Fiji, and are beginning to play a different role. Rather than simply providing services to children within their centre, they are collaborating with, and supporting nearby regular schools. The emerging role of special schools as resource centres is consistent with trends in other countries (Grech, 2014; Lapham and Papikyan, 2012) and is advocated within the CRPD.

Contrast between SDG indicators and local priorities

In addition to examining the themes and priorities emerging from the data (discussed in the above sections), researchers also analysed the transcripts for responses to direct questions about which potential measures of change (indicators) participants felt would be relevant to gauge success of efforts towards IE in Fiji, and consequently the achievement of SDG 4 for children with disabilities. Fourteen indicators were mentioned repeatedly, and are listed in order of those proposed most to least frequently: 1) achievement (academic); 2) participation in school and extracurricular activities; 3) independence (including responsibilities at home); 4) employment; 5) enrolment; 6) participation in the wider community, including faith based organisations; 7) peer interaction and social skills; 8) self-esteem/confidence; 9) transition through levels of education; 10) family supportive of their child's education; 11) child's happiness and quality of life; 12) stakeholder involvement and approval; 13) school attendance; and 14) discrimination.

As a comparison, the SDG 4 indicators related to measuring factors for primary school-aged children with disabilities include disability disaggregated data on: percentage of children with minimum proficiency in reading and maths; gross intake ratio to the last grade[i]; completion rate; out-of-school rate; percentage of children overage for grade; and percentage of schools with access to adapted infrastructure and materials for students with disabilities (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). Of the fourteen indicators and the spectrum of barriers and enablers identified in our findings, only four issues would be measured by SDG 4 indicators, including: enrolment, achievement, transition through levels of education, and accessible school environments. Several of the indicators deemed important by Fijian stakeholders which are not captured by SDG 4, reflect Rabukawaqa's (2009) description of the naturally

inclusive Fijian society that existed pre-colonisation, where every person had a role which contributed to the social fabric, and where societies taught individuals the skills to fulfil those responsibilities; where success was not measured using narrow academic outcomes, but in terms of whether the individual worked well within the broader family and community, contributing to harmonious and functioning communities, thereby resulting in individual happiness.

Measurement of the SDG 4 indicators is very feasible within an administrative system such as the Fiji Education Management Information System (EMIS) or within standard household surveys, and these indicators are routinely collected globally (Sprunt et al., 2016). On the other hand, the locally-relevant indicators are far harder to measure at a national level. It is not surprising that the lengthy global negotiations and consultations to develop the SDG indicator framework (SDSN, 2015) resulted in a list of indicators primarily focused on school level outcomes measurable within an EMIS. However, the relevance of the other culturally, context-specific indicators should not be ignored. There are a range of ways these could be collected, including periodic surveys and qualitative studies. Individual indicators such as participation, independence at home, peer interaction and social skills could be measured at an individual level through the objectives in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP), which is a tool increasingly used for students with disabilities across Fiji. Periodic reviews of a sample of IEPs across Fiji could track trends in prioritisation and achievement of these indicators.

The challenge of moving too fast towards IE without appropriate resources

In its Fiji social indicators status report, UNICEF Pacific (2011) summarised that 'much needs to be done to achieve the aims of EFA and an all-inclusive education sector'. IE is a process of major transformation and a systemic and staged approach is necessary with acknowledgement of the time required for change to occur. Our study highlighted the complexity and risks of moving too rapidly towards IE without having appropriate structures, resources and capacity. These risks are consistent with those identified by Urwick & Elliott (2010), and require policy makers and donors in Fiji to consider the following scenario: if children with disabilities are enrolled into classrooms where teachers are unprepared, unmotivated or unsupported, where assistive technologies are unavailable, or reasonable accommodation for learning and assessment is not in place, the child may have a negative experience of school and struggle to perform. This may lead to worsening self-esteem in the child and validation of pessimistic expectations about IE in the family, teacher or community. The child, family, school and IE policy itself can be set up for failure unless important features are in place. This issue is perhaps most sharply outlined in the case of poor families. As emphasised by Grech (2014) in his analysis of disability, poverty and education in Guatemala and expressed in our study by a DPO representative, poor families have to

overcome even greater barriers to enable their child with disability to access school, and if the effort does not result in quality education, the opportunity cost is enormous.

Heeraman (2009:48) a former, long-term special and inclusive teacher educator in Fiji, supports the view of 'responsible inclusion' – finding a path towards IE that takes seriously the constraints of resources and expertise, whilst advocating, training and working towards improving the situation. This view is aligned with that of Urwick and Elliot (2010:147), who challenge those advocating that all children with disabilities must be educated in regular classrooms irrespective of the individual or the context. They contend that the uncompromising policy of inclusive schooling in Lesotho, in the context of inadequate resources, training or supports, contributed to an entire generation of children with special educational needs receiving not 'even a minimally acceptable level of education'.

Limitations and further research

The option to decline participation in the study allowed a potential bias towards including those with a vested interest in education of people with disabilities. This was deemed acceptable because the research was focused on developing indicators for IE. Therefore the views of people willing to discuss IE measurement were more valuable for this study. Logistical difficulties for the parent FGD meant the group only had three participants and time limitations meant a further FGD with parents could not be arranged.

Further research is strongly recommended to investigate the conflict between the need to identify and 'count' children with disabilities to enable planning, budgeting and evaluating responses at the individual and national levels, and the imperative to avoid stigmatising children further by identifying them, particularly related to the use of the term disability.

Conclusion

The study's findings reflect important barriers, enablers and other contextual issues which have implications for the achievement of SDG 4 for children with disabilities in Fiji. In summary, the issues that emerged most strongly were the need for or the role of: a policy implementation plan and resourcing to ensure the national IE policy is activated; improved awareness and attitudes regarding the right to education of children with disabilities; competent, confident and compassionate teachers; disability-specific services and assistive technology; accessible buildings and transport; and the role of special schools alongside inclusive mainstream schools.

IE implementation needs to consider context, human and structural capacity, policy and political environment, and budget availability. Expanding IE requires Fiji to incorporate and

build on existing strengths to ensure that systems and people are prepared and resourced for inclusion. The journey towards IE has to be cognisant of the needs, abilities and choices of individual children, and the context of Fiji's educational progression. Children with disabilities must not be further disadvantaged by hurried efforts to shift from specialised settings to mainstream classrooms in which teachers are not yet trained and support structures lagging behind.

The MoE together with DPOs, the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons, universities, civil society and faith based organisations, donors and their implementing partners have played vital roles in progressing IE within Fiji – at policy, legislative, capacity and practice levels, and the SDGs reinforce the importance of this work. The reporting inevitabilities of the SDGs will require stakeholders to work together to make sure the SDGs and the resulting data are useful in Fiji, and not simply an overwhelming reporting burden.

Global advocacy and technical efforts to institute a 'data revolution' for disability-inclusive development (Mitra, 2013) have kept disability in the spotlight during SDG negotiations, and will play an ongoing role in facilitating accountability for equitable development gains. Considering the Fijian MoE special education officer is already overstretched and under-resourced, it is apt that the number of indicators imposed by the SDGs has been rationalized. However, Artiles and Dyson (2005:57) remind us that IE development is a 'multidimensional phenomenon, with different countries…developing not simply at different rates but in quite different directions'. Whilst a short list of indicators is advantageous, there is a risk of global homogenisation of IE programmes and policies if governments and donors focus resources only on the achievement of a confined set of targets. A small number of indicators that are valued by Fijians are compatible with the SDG 4 indicators. On the other hand, there is a wide range of contextually and culturally specific indicators that are not reportable in the SDG indicator framework, but which must be prioritized within Fiji to measure important changes.

The essential goal of SDG 4 – to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all – can be practically achieved in Fiji, but with consciousness and alertness to prevent a limited focus on the areas related to the SDG indicators at the exclusion of other areas of local importance.

Notes

[1] Gross intake ratio to the last grade refers to the total number of new entrants (non-repeaters) in the last grade of primary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population at the theoretical entrance age to the last grade of primary education.

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