

Making education inclusive of children with disabilities in Samoa

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In April 2010, eight Pacific States met in Apia, Samoa, for the first time for a Commonwealth Secretariat Consultation on Education. They were given the opportunity to 'make connections and build partnerships' with each other and the Commonwealth Secretariat. There were global goals and targets to meet and all had national initiatives to implement to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); for example, achieving gender equality in education and universal primary education. It was an opportunity for Pacific small states to recognise their role in endorsing, together with other Commonwealth countries, the commitment to the human rights-based approach to development, as well as facing the challenges of addressing economic vulnerability, environmental degradation, climate change and resilience to climatic changes and scarce natural resources.

Samoa was one of the participating countries at the consultation. The vision for education in Samoa is 'a quality holistic education system that recognises and realises the spiritual, cultural, intellectual and physical potential of all participants, enabling them to make fulfilling life choices'. Key concepts integrated with this vision are equity, efficiency, quality, relevance and sustainability.

The levels of education in Samoa include early childhood education (ECE), primary, secondary and tertiary education and training, such as university education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), as well as informal learning after school. Children with special needs are included at all levels. When Samoa presented on its education priorities, it identified nine priorities, one of which was universal primary education (UPE), including those with special needs.

Developing a sustainable model for inclusive education for children with disabilities: the Samoa experience

The following model is a case study that was presented by the Samoa team at a Pacific Regional Initiative for the Development of Basic Education (PRIDE) Conference in March 2009 in Fiji. It was to showcase a system that would be sustainable for inclusive education (IE) for children with disabilities in Samoa.

Background

The Compulsory Education Act was introduced in the early 1990s. Following this, the provision in Samoa for the schooling of children with disabilities (CWD) consisted of special needs units attached to six of the primary schools. However, it was realised that under this arrangement, CWDs were still being segregated and treated differently. The effort then was to develop an inclusive approach for these students. It was a step forward in the sense that families

had come forth from keeping children at home.

A survey by the Samoa Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (MESC) in 2000 among children in the age range 0–14 years identified approximately 1,200 children with disabilities. This total was considered conservative, for it seemed that only about 200 of the identified children were attending some form of education.

Extensive discussion and planning of the system resulted in a sub-project, funded by the PRIDE programme, for the development of a sustainable system of IE in Samoa. Although the sub-project concentrated on the schooling of CWDs, the concept of inclusive education is broader than this and it sought to bring *all* children into schools, including those not attending due to social or economic reasons. The sub-project selected here was one of several projects that PRIDE was involved in with MESC. It was also one of the largest sub-projects in terms of the number of activities and the number of stakeholders involved in its implementation.

For these reasons this sub-project was chosen as one to showcase at the 2009 PRIDE Conference. The project had an impact on national policy, evident in the fact that the 2006–2015 Strategic Plan for Education in Samoa shifted its policy focus from CWDs to inclusive education. As a result, there is apparently now a large number of students with special needs attending regular schools and this is regarded as a major achievement. The development of policies and programmes in the Samoa system to include children with disabilities within the regular classrooms and schools is testimony to the commitment to achieving a workable and sustainable model. It also embraces the broader concept of inclusive education that acknowledges the value of *all* children, and demonstrates an acceptance of the responsibility to ensure that children's rights are granted accordingly and supported to ensure universal primary school education.

Inclusive Education sub-project

The need to provide a sustainable system of inclusive education in Samoa was driven by two key factors:

1. Recognition that every child has a right to an education; and
2. The education system needs to change to accommodate a broader range of children's abilities and learning. This involves the development of teacher training strategies; adaptation of curriculums, teaching and learning materials; the provision of adequate transport systems; modification of facilities for ease of access; and equity of access to communication and information.

The development of a system of on-site and community-based support for schools, parents of children with disabilities and individual children with disabilities was critical.



The many issues that surrounded inclusive education were quite daunting at the time, given the following factors:

- Too few of the children with disabilities were attending regular village schools.
- There was a lack of early detection and intervention, thus rates of mortality for CWDs in Samoa were high.
- The referral links for CWDs and their families between health, education and community-based NGOs were weak.
- Special needs teachers placed in special needs units faced many challenges in establishing inclusive practice.
- The negative attitudes of people to developing inclusive education, practices and societies were not always good. It also did not help that there was limited access to information regarding CWDs.
- Basic factors like having specifications for ramp gradients, door widths, railings and toilets hampered easy access to schools' facilities.

Finally, the sub-project embraced a comprehensive list of priority needs:

- Firstly, there was the need to articulate a system at the national level that would support the sustainability of inclusive education at both village school and community levels.
- Secondly, there was the need to have in place a set of guidelines for school design that would allow easy access for people with physical disabilities, including those who are blind.

- Thirdly, the development and delivery of an intensive media campaign utilising radio, TV and newspaper media to present information and discussion on topics relating to disability.
- Finally, there was a need for a programme to record and share information on 'quality good practice in inclusive education'. This involved a series of teacher workshops and supportive monitoring visits and so it was envisaged that this, as a new sub-project, would add value at the strategic systems level.

The primary goal was then to develop a sustainable community-based system of support for school communities that included children with disabilities. Attitudes were anticipated to be a huge barrier because of prevalent traditional superstitions among communities with regard to disability.

The process of change required of schools and education systems meant a constant drive to remove the barriers that would limit access to education. Messages were developed aimed at changing people's attitudes. Posters and other promotional materials concentrated on children's *abilities*, not their disabilities. The organisers and implementers also found it imperative to develop feelings for and an understanding of the human dimensions. Thus messages such as 'I want to sing, just like you', 'I want to dance, just like you' and 'I want to learn, just like you', although simple, had a profound effect in making 'connections' between CWDs and others.

The sub-project commenced in March 2006 and ended in 2009. Its implementation and operations were coordinated by an NGO, SENESE, in partnership with MESC.

Funding may have been considered modest but it achieved much. SENESE provided its expert services and support generously. Additional funds enabled the extension of some components of the programme, such as a media campaign and a camp for parents of special needs children. The latter was noted as being attended by parents from all over Samoa. An outstanding feature of the project was the extent to which synergies were built between MESC and SENESE to build a system that would continue even after the project was over. The range of project activities provided support, attitude change, accessible facilities and refinement of national plans.

Raising the level of professionalism of teaching staff was also essential. Public campaigning to promote parent and community involvement and ownership was important. Four main components were identified.

1. **Support** activities included provision of special training for principals, teachers, curriculum staff and parents; efforts to empower parents in giving their CWD the best they could; the training of teacher aides to assist in the classrooms with the special needs students and a trial placement of four salaried aides in government schools; the development of resource and support materials; and the coordination of national plans for the education of those with hearing and visual impairments.
2. **Inclusive attitudes** among communities were created through an enthusiastic media campaign that was highly effective in sending out catchy, thought-provoking messages. The campaign included songs, posters, brochures, TV and radio spots, a camp for families and more. The emphasis was on creating the power of 'togetherness' to learn better, sing better and 'sign' better. This approach brought tremendous positive response.
3. **Accessibility of school buildings** was an area of concern. From the start, schools had been built without particular concern for how CWDs might be able to access them, and there was no true knowledge on what might be required or any basic guidelines to provide minimal standards. Hence it was important to first ensure there were government policies in place that would provide CWDs with access to school buildings.
4. **Sharing stories of significant change** was initiated to sustain and extend enthusiasm. This was anticipated to be a major factor, and thus the earliest stages included taking pictures and recording interviews in order to share the process of what inclusive education can look like in government schools and communities.

Initially the programme was intended to be school-based, but there was a strong feeling that it should begin with the families, at home. Thus, as the programme proceeded, parents became increasingly empowered, involved, confident and aware that they had a right to advocate and participate in order to have their children in schools.

This was a positive spin-off, and implementers were able to assert that in any IE project, working with the parents, from a very early stage, was a really important factor. Together with an effective media campaign, this became very powerful in terms of changing people's negative attitudes towards CWDs in the home and the community. People became much more positive, and the attitude





of reluctance to let others see a child with a disability in the family has now become a lesser problem. The key concept of 'inclusive' in our Samoan culture has also, over time, assisted in eroding the 'it's a curse' mentality.

Teachers, as previously mentioned, were already working within the IE policy of the Ministry. The on-site support, however, which this sub-project gave these teachers was tremendously important. Mentors were able to visit and reassure the teachers that they were doing a good job. They suggested other activities teachers could try and also celebrated the teachers' achievements with them. This all helped in boosting confidence, encouraging and stimulating innovation and initiative, and in building teachers' involvement and sense of self-worth.

Some of the activities included the following:

- Three national workshops on how to support children with different types of disabilities (blindness, deafness, physical disabilities).
- A specific workshop for identifying each child's stage of development and tailoring an individual education programme for that child's needs.
- A national forum and camp for parents of deaf children.
- Employing parents as teacher aides in four pilot schools.
- Providing support visits to the schools as well as opportunities for teacher aides to come to the SENESE centre for support and further 'just in time' training (three times/month).

- Three television adverts played over the television stations (thus exposing all of Samoa to IE ideas in Samoan and English).
- Radio talkback segments providing communities in rural areas with an opportunity to discuss issues on air.

Conclusion

While the Inclusive Education (IE) programme in Samoa through this sub-project has made great strides, challenges and obstacles still remain. During implementation, many lessons have been learnt about planning and putting into practice educational projects and improvements. There has been a whole process of continually addressing challenges and reducing the barriers to education for an increasingly large number of children, including CWDs. The first challenge was to build the capacity of SENESE as an organisation to be able to work with MESCS. A second major challenge was that of finding people with enough time to be able to translate material. In developing the sustainable Samoa IE system, it was always important to communicate well at all levels of the society.

Propelled by successes to date, the IE programme has begun planning and exploring further possibilities for the sustainability of the programme, particularly in support of the needs of CWDs. Firstly, plans are in place to institutionalise teacher aide posts into the MESCS organisational structure. Not only have these proved invaluable, it is the most secure way to ensure the continuation of this type of back-up for the teachers. The Education Act 2009 now provides the legal mandate for compulsory education for all

children, including Special Needs/Inclusive Education. Secondly, talks with donors like AusAID have led to the design of a five-year project to continue work with SENESE and MESC, should PRIDE-support come to an end. Finally, the formulation of a national disability strategy and the formation of a disability self-advocacy group has provided further underpinning 'from within', and the National University of Samoa (NUS) has taken on the training of specialist IE teachers. Of great encouragement is that other donors with support have been attracted to Samoa because of the inclusive education approach that has been adopted.

Opportunities are available for improvement and have opened many exciting avenues for further progress. There is still a lot of work to be done. However, with all the aforementioned activities, good ground work has been consolidated on which Inclusive Education can move forward.

References

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