



## Case Study

Volume-05|Issue-06|2024

**The Plight of Inclusive Education in Cultural Diversity through the Arrival of the Girmityas**Atendra Kumar<sup>\*1</sup>, Zahida Ali<sup>2</sup><sup>1,2</sup>Assistant Lecturer, Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, College of Humanities and Education, School of Education, Fiji National University, Fiji**Article History**

Received: 10.06.2024

Accepted: 16.06.2024

Published: 20.06.2024

**Citation**Kumar, A., & Ali, Z. (2024). The Plight of Inclusive Education in Cultural Diversity through the Arrival of the Girmityas. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(6), 1-6.

**Abstract:** The Girmityas played an important role and worked tirelessly to build Fiji's early colonial economy. Despite most Girmityas coming from impoverished backgrounds and not having a formal education themselves, they knew the value of education and where possible, strived to ensure their children received education despite having impairments. Inclusive education (IE) is founded on the belief that all students, regardless of learning background, deficiencies, or individual characteristics, have equal rights in learning settings. Students with special education needs and those with typical development both demand inclusive education. Inclusive education has become a global movement to teach all children, including those with special needs, in regular classrooms. Today, IE also includes students who are excluded, discriminated against, underprivileged, and all other pupils. This presentation deals with research to assess teachers' perspectives and behaviours about inclusive education for students coming from the diverse cultural background and providing solutions to challenges encountered by educators. The study was conducted using a qualitative research technique and a case study design. The participants of this study were 50 volunteer primary in-service schoolteachers from western Fiji. A descriptive analysis approach was used to examine the data.

According to the findings of this research, instructors had a lack of conceptual clarity on the definition of inclusive education, and most of them focused on the basic principle of inclusivity, while only a few sought to tie inclusiveness to instructional techniques. Furthermore, the findings revealed that teachers did not engage in activities aimed at implementing inclusive education in their classrooms and that they had different expectations from the Ministry of Education, school administrations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and parents. According to the survey results, most instructors considered themselves moderately qualified for inclusive education methods, while others considered themselves incompetent.

The results offer those such as the Ministry of Education a direction in organising in-service that includes training from expert teams; improving school physical conditions to meet the needs of diverse student groups with different interests, abilities, and disadvantages; re looking at the ways to include the lives of Girmityas and increasing school-family cooperation.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, Girmityas, Diversity, Impoverished

Copyright © 2024 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

**INTRODUCTION****Background of the Study**

Inclusive education has been in existence in Fiji since the 1960s. Many of the Catholic Church schools enrolled students with disabilities. Although formal education commenced from 1835 with the introduction of basic reading and arithmetic, there are no recorded evidence of education for disabled students during the Girmity era. The government did not assist Indian education prior to 1916, and the prevailing colonial attitude was that it would be self-defeating to educate Indians as they had been brought to Fiji to be an unskilled workforce. There were no education privileges for children of the Girmityas. Children had to start work on the fields as soon as they turned 12. The children of the early labourers all grew up illiterate. Their possession of knowledge was the only way out of poverty. The infant was taken to the fields as well as it wasn't right to leave it with the usual old women who used to look after a few older children while their parents were at work. Despite the many challenges, the Indian Girmityas started setting up schools from 1916. Their broad vision was to educate

every child irrespective of their abilities so that they could acquire human values and respect each other after witnessing the inhumane treatment of their people by the colonial masters. (Lal, 2012).

The foundation of inclusive education is the idea that all students, regardless of their educational background, deficiencies, or personal characteristics, have equal rights when they enter learning environments (Malinen & Xu, 2012). Students with disabilities form a minority group in Fiji. Currently, there are 17 schools for special education in Fiji. Inclusive education provides the opportunity to learn and accept individual differences. Inclusive education provides high-quality education to all pupils while considering their diverse educational requirements (UNESCO, 2009). Including students with disabilities in regular schools alongside their classmates is part of the worldwide human rights movement, which refers to the potential of students with disabilities to participate fully in all activities. Moreover, inclusive education provides real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded.

Since the 1960s till the present, inclusive education has developed into a global movement to educate all children, including those with special needs. In some countries, inclusive education is seen as a method of serving students with special educational needs within general school settings. Yet, inclusive education is seen internationally as a system that responds to the requirements of a varied variety of learners and fosters diversity, effectively eradicating all types of prejudice (UNESCO, 2001, 2009). Stainback and Stainback (1996) and Alur and Bach (2010) describe inclusive education as placing all students, including those with impairments, in mainstream classes with the required assistance.

### **Inclusive Education in Fiji**

In Fiji, education of disabled children has been mostly based on instruction in special schools. Inclusive education seeks to ensure that underprivileged pupils attend school, overcome challenges, lessen fear, prejudice, and rejection, and foster greater tolerance. The goal of inclusive education is to guarantee that all students have access to and participation in high-quality education (Puri & Abraham, 2004).

In November 2011, the Ministry of Education's Policy on Efficient Implementation of Inclusive Education in Fiji went into force. Children with disabilities began enrolling at five Inclusive Education Demonstration Schools in four rural districts and a squatter community in the capital Suva in January 2013 under the Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP), which is sponsored by an Australian government assistance program. After that, the Ministry of Education started testing 'inclusion cluster schools,' which are mainstream primary schools placed near some of the special schools, in early 2014.

Underprivileged children need access to quality education and schools are the best place to accommodate diversity and inclusion. It is a theory that directs educational policies as well as current normative and legal frameworks, and it also stops the cycle of marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination of disadvantaged people by altering educational techniques to assure equity and keep these kids in school (Dusik & Santarosa, 2016).

The special schools assist the cluster schools, and students are moved from the special schools to the cluster schools, with teacher aids migrating when necessary and practicable. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with AQEP, is implementing a large capacity development program across Fiji to build the capacity of head teachers and 'Inclusion Coordinators,' who are teachers in mainstream schools who have been designated as focal points for disability inclusion in the school (Sprunt, B. 2014).

Attempts to enhance education for disabled children in Fiji has gained momentum throughout time, and with the recent implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill 2016, and the ratification of the CRPD in March 2017, they are set to develop much further. Statistics from Ministry of Education, Fiji shows 736 primary schools, 874 ECE Centers, 172 secondary schools and 17 special schools currently in operation. Out of the 736 Primary schools, 398 are Inclusive meaning students with diverse needs are welcome here. This means a total of 1413 special students (518 females and 895 males) are currently in schools throughout Fiji. (Fiji MoE, 2023:2). These students are from all ethnic communities living in Fiji. According to Fiji's 2008-18 National Disability Policy, "special and inclusive education services and programs for all children with special needs in schools, families, communities, and hospitals" should be provided and reviewed (FNCDP and Ministry of Health, 2008). Fiji has mostly educated students with disabilities via special schools, with a limited number of regular primary and secondary schools. The Fiji government supported the Policy for the Effective Implementation of Special and Inclusive Education in 2010, refocusing the emphasis on the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools while strengthening and supporting existing special schools. Since then, the government has extended IE by establishing IE in a growing number of primary schools, in collaboration with the Australian aid-funded Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP) (Sprunt, 2014). Certain policies that are in place for the disabled has its effects in various ways.

### **Effect of Disability on the Lives of Students**

Highly vulnerable disabled children have specific needs and interests in their lives. Children are active and resourceful citizens but most often are regarded as helpless victims. Children are often abused verbally, emotionally and physically in the school and in most cases such incidents are not reported. There are a number of causes which are primarily responsible for vulnerability of children with special needs and social structure.

The fundamental causes influencing the vulnerability of children and social structures are as follows:

1. **Material/economic vulnerability** - Children with disability often lack the privilege of getting most of the resources that they need to intellectually develop their learning skills.
2. **Social Vulnerability**- the breakdown of social patterns for children creates more risk as they are socially disconnected from the public. This further affects how children cope with the wider community.
3. **Organizational vulnerability**- There is lack of strong national and local structures who can take positive steps and reasonable adjustments to remove barriers that individuals face because of their disability.

4. Educational vulnerability- Lack of access to information and knowledge invites vulnerability. This further leads to exploitation, discrimination, abuse, neglect or violence. Children with disability are taught at a different pace and therefore remain at a high risk of denied access to information.
5. Attitudinal and motivational vulnerability- This usually occurs due to lack of public awareness and appreciation. Through awareness, the misconceptions and stereotypes can be brought to the forefront. When these are gone, attitudes and behaviors become more impactful and positive.
6. Cultural vulnerability- certain beliefs and customs lead to segregation, social isolation, discrimination and access to social life. In many cultures, people believe that disability is caused by 'past lives', mystical intervention or past actions of the ancestors.
7. Physical vulnerability- weak buildings or weak individuals provides a high risk of exposure to assaults or degradation as they are unable to protect themselves.

The increased vulnerability of children is also associated with factors which are socially and culturally deeply rooted in the community. The society looks at individuals from a different perspective. Students with special needs are often categorised as helpless individuals who need a lot of attention and care. The Girmityas era must have had children with disability. Although there is no recorded evidence of disabled people in that era, children with disability must have been closely supervised by adults. Despite these broadly applied factors, individuals are still different, with different perceptions and values regarding important topics, such as the rights of children with special needs. Armstrong and Barton (1999) have claimed that "Within and across societies, individuals and groups have different understanding, values, interpretations and discourses with regard to issues of human rights and disability". It is quite apparent that individuals with disability need the right access so that they can prosper in their lives.

#### **Access is Essential**

All children have the right to education, and inclusive education attempts to guarantee that all children in their community have access to an adequate, relevant, accessible, and successful education. This education begins at home with the family and involves official, non-formal, and community-based education activities of all forms.

Children were not given access to the learning experience or opportunities as other children during early schooling in 1916. Separate schools, classrooms, or marginalization within the mainstream setting create different, and often less robust educational experiences, and yet the "worth" of these children is measured by the same standardized test used with every other child. How

are these students expected to succeed? Heheir (2002) noted "Interpretations of what is *wrong* with students flow from these test scores and seldom give much weight to factors related to opportunity-to-learn, cultural differences, English language proficiency, bilingualism, or current instructional experiences".

To move inclusive educational practices forward, children must be permitted equality and access in education at all levels of schooling. It is clear that the promotion of an inclusive school culture requires that all school personnel value diversity and view differences as assets. A vast number of studies have shown that inclusive education offers benefits for kids' cognitive, social, and emotional development. They also show that, when compared to segregated education, inclusive education provides more opportunities to develop social, emotional, and behavioural skills not only of children who require additional support but also of children of typical development in terms of increasing understanding and acceptance of diversity (Molina Roldán, S., Marauri, J., Aubert, A., & Flecha, R. (2021).

According to the findings of various research studies, students without difficulties have positive attitudes and positive beliefs and express readiness to accept students with disabilities, as well as a positive attitude toward joint teaching with them, which is a critical factor for successful inclusion (Radisavljevic-Janic et al., 2018; Alnahdi and Schwab, 2021).

Despite major changes in legislation and the growth of the inclusion movement, there exists continued segregation of students with disabilities and inclusive classrooms (Heheir., 2002). All efforts need to be put together to work against the rising development of segregation. Teacher training programs must be a start off point. Global efforts to face future needs in teacher and leadership education include fostering dispositions that view diversity as an enriching aspect of classrooms. Professionals can be trained to educate a diverse group of students with innovation techniques and creative measures of respect and culture acceptance. The girmityas were a mixture of Hindus, Muslims and Christians from different parts of India all following different cultures and beliefs. The diverse group taught values to all children despite their cultural beliefs. The verbal delivery of values was appreciated and carried on from one generation to the next. Today, Fiji schools have a set curriculum on moral and civic education especially for lower primary students. However, students with disability are at a greater challenge to learn about cultural practices. Instead, Inclusive education itself focuses on delivering the best for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Teacher attitude towards students with disability also plays a vital role during the entire learning process.

#### **Teacher Attitude Towards Disabled Students**

Teachers often form their attitudes towards students and schooling, based largely on their own experiences as a student. The primary aim of our study is to examine teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, sociodemographic factors influencing such attitudes, and factors for the inclusion process in education. This strategy can be an excellent basis for developing specialized programs and measures to improve inclusive education.

Furthermore, teachers in training are segregated with respect to their certification area. Normal teachers learn how to instruct a diverse group of students and specialized educational pedagogies are reserved for candidates who pursue the area of special education teacher. This problem is demonstrated when teachers are asked about their perceptions of their own ability to teach students with a variety of learning needs.

Research shows that general education teachers feel unprepared and/or unable to teach students with disabilities (DeSimone & Parmar, 2003; Smith & Smith, 2000; Stahl, 2002), and that they feel that teaching students with disabilities involves additional time and resources that in turn restricts their ability to teach students without identified disabilities (Rose, 2001), indicating that teachers are focusing on curriculum and not on pedagogy. "Regular classroom teachers learned to view themselves as unprepared for this responsibility.

Teachers are in need of intensive training when it comes to inclusion of special education students in the regular education program. They are challenged by the fact of including students with disabilities in the general curriculum. Students are from various cultural backgrounds and to meet the demands of their learning pace, remains a great challenge for the classroom practitioner. Physical proximity is not enough to ensure a student's active participation and progress in an inclusive classroom. Teachers need to know what accommodation and adaptations are successful for students with special needs. The girmity era and even in the colonial days, there was no technology and resources to teach children. Today, with Free Education Grant and modern technology, Teachers must identify the need for resources, teaching aids, multimedia boards, etc to facilitate learning in the best way possible so that no child is left behind.

### **Future Inclusive Education Classroom**

Future teachers must be familiar with new forms of knowledge regarding identity and difference that are based on inclusive values (Slee, 2001). Teacher training programs must also strive towards recruiting teacher candidates with disabilities and with diverse cultural, migrant and other backgrounds. It is imperative that teachers themselves represent the diversity that the philosophy of inclusion calls for. The teacher training institutes must include the necessary training for all

teachers so that they are prepared to enter and teach all students from diverse backgrounds.

Including teachers to create training programs that will provide other teacher and administrative candidates with experiences to fully experience diversity (ability, culturally, linguistically, etc.) will certainly assist students. This can be achieved by studying in various schools who offer inclusive education and observing and participating in schools that demonstrate the best practices in educating a diverse student population.

"Inclusive systems of education are essential to improve the learning environment by deploying skilled teachers, equitably targeting financial and learning support to disadvantaged schools, and providing intercultural and bilingual education" (Unesco, 2010, p.2). This responsibility cannot belong solely to teachers and administrators. Training programs must be at the forefront of this shifting educational focus.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, a case study design was used to reveal the existing situation. The purpose of the case study design was to conduct an in-depth analysis for teacher perceptions of inclusive education and the impact of Girmityas on the education plight in Fiji. A questionnaire using Likert scale was used for data collection. A sample of 50 volunteer in-service teachers from diverse cultural background in Western Fiji were selected to respond to the questions developed by the researchers which was done using literature. 25 males and 25 females were selected for this research from rural and urban location for consultation.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the study was to assess teachers' perspectives and behaviours about inclusive education for students coming from the diverse cultural background and providing solutions to challenges encountered by educators. The Girmityas did not go through a formal education system. However, the majority of the Indian community initiated plans to start formal education in Fiji so that all their children could read and write. Amongst the children from diverse cultural backgrounds, there were some with disabilities who were not given importance to but supervised by adults for their safety. Once school system started, there were many obstacles year after year. After many trials, Inclusive education was implemented in the late 1960's.

One of the obstacles to the effective implementation of inclusive education is crowded classrooms. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should make attempts to decrease the number of students in classes. The overwhelming majority of the teachers claimed that packed classrooms, a lack of cooperation between the family and the school, and poor physical

conditions at the schools prevent them from implementing inclusive education efficiently. (Braunsteiner, et al 2014). Other issues there was insufficient in-service training for teachers, and that there was a lack of knowledge regarding alternative practices for disadvantaged students.

In this regard, some teachers stated the following: "Family issues and inadequate family support are the main factors that make it tough" There were just a few games for introductions. There was no extensive information exchange regarding alternate techniques, materials, or any kind of visual materials, and there was nothing to learn about how to meet various demands. Our classrooms lack sufficient supplies, they are overcrowded, and the building's physical surroundings, do not support inclusive learning.

The great majority of the teachers reported that they are partially competent in implementing inclusive education practices. Most teachers claimed that he/she is not competent and his/her opinions were as follows "I do not find myself competent at all. That is, I do not have enough knowledge and qualifications; I am just using my mind and trying to be humane. I have no scientific knowledge; therefore, I do not find myself competent." However, few teachers saw himself/herself competent because of in-service training. This teacher's opinions were as follows: "For example, in this school, I am the first one to implement inclusive education,... not now, but I have been doing it for five years, I have been giving training program in primary schools, inclusive education, all of them."

The expectations of the teachers from the Ministry of Education for inclusive education for effective implementation include offering professional in-service training for teachers, decreasing the number of students in classes, improvement of schools' physical conditions, fostering school-community cooperation, offering training for families, and reducing the intensity of the curriculum. Majority of the teachers felt that necessity of offering professional in-service training more seriously are as follows: "I think we should have this training directly by subject-matter experts. We are normally trained by our colleagues.

We must educate both our teachers and our students to work collaboratively to celebrate diversity through certain tools. Taking advantage of an increasing awareness about inclusive education in legislation and policy, we have to share and disseminate information about existing policy and practice. Inclusion is "a principled approach to the development of education and society. It is linked to democratic participation within and beyond education." (Booth, 2011) The contribution of diverse stakeholders in the development of a school's culture and environment must grow. As Sapon-Shevin (2003) asks, "what kind of a world do we want to create, and how should we educate students for that world?"

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed teachers did not perform different activities for gifted students, and thus, these students became disadvantaged in the classroom. In this regard, looking at the diverse cultural backgrounds, different activities should be developed and conducted for students with disability.

During the colonial period, there was no existence of education policy that looked into the welfare of children with disability: ad hoc decisions were made by the governor and the Legislative council. It is quite apparent that even during the Girmity era, education for children did not exist. As such, all children remained under the supervision of adults including those with disabilities.

Through sheer hard work, the Girmityas have etched a very powerful place in our nation's history and it is our duty to make ourselves worthy of their legacy. It is our duty to give them the recognition and narrate their hardships to the future generations. In-service training on sample practices of inclusive education should be provided to teachers by subject-matter experts.

Schools must ensure that peer support, trained and qualified teachers, community awareness and moral values are the core deliverables while ensuring that children from diverse cultural backgrounds are fairly treated and that the challenges faced by classroom practitioners are minimised.

## REFERENCES

1. Alur, M. 1978. 'The Multi-disciplinary Approach to Cerebral Palsy'. Paper read at ICPS International Conference, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ... **Alur, M.**, and **M. Bach. 2010**. The Journey for Inclusive Education in the Indian Sub-Continent.
2. Armstrong, F., Barton, L. (1999) "Is there anyone there concerned with human rights?"
3. " Cross-cultural connections, disability and the struggle for change in England. In Armstrong, F., Barton, L., Ed. Disability human rights and education: Cross-cultural perspectives, Buckingham: Open University press.
4. AQEP (2019), Disability-Inclusive Education in Fiji Learning from The Australian Aid-Funded Access to Quality Education Program, [http://www.did4all.com.au/Resources/2019\\_Casestudy\\_AQEP\\_disability\\_inclusive\\_education.pdf](http://www.did4all.com.au/Resources/2019_Casestudy_AQEP_disability_inclusive_education.pdf)
5. Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2000, 2002, 2011 3rd edition). *The index for inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools*. Bristol: CSIE.
6. Braunsteiner, M. L., & Mariano-Lapidus, S. (2014). A perspective of inclusion: Challenges for the future. *Global Education Review*, 1(1).
7. DeSimone, J. R., & Parmar, R. S. (2006). Middle school mathematics teachers' beliefs about

- inclusion of students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 21 (2), 98–110.
8. Dusik, C. L., & Santarosa, L. M. C. (2016). Mousekey syllabic virtual keyboard: An assistive technology tool for people with physical disabilities. *ICT in Education: Multiple and Inclusive Perspectives*, 171-197.
  9. Heheir, T. (2002). Eliminating ableism in education. *Harvard Education Review* 72 (1), 1-32.
  11. Malinen & Xu, European journal of special needs education 27 (1), 51-68
  12. Ministry of Health (2008) : National Disability Policy , *Fiji National Council for Disabled People* .
  13. Molina Roldán, S., Marauri, J., Aubert, A., & Flecha, R. (2021). How inclusive interactive learning environments benefit students without special needs. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1510. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.661427>
  14. Puri, M., & Abraham, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Handbook of inclusive education for educators, administrators and planners: Within walls, without boundaries*. Sage.
  15. Radojlovic, J., Kilibarda, T., Radevic, S., Maricic, M., Parezanovic Ilic, K., Djordjic, M., ... & Radovanovic, S. (2022). Attitudes of primary school teachers toward inclusive education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 2290.
  16. Rose, R. (2001) Primary school teacher perceptions of the conditions required to include pupils with special educational needs. *Educational Review* 53 (2) 147 – 156.
  17. Ministry of Education, Fiji (2023). Retrieved from: [www.femis.com](http://www.femis.com)
  18. Sapon-Shevin, M. (2003). Inclusion: A matter of social justice. *Educational leadership*, 61(2), 25-25.
  19. Slee, R. (2001). Social justice and the changing directions in educational research: The case of inclusive education, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 5 (2-3), 167-177.
  20. Stainback, S. B., & Stainback, W. C. (Eds.). (1996). *Inclusion: A guide for educators*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co
  21. Sprunt, B., Edmonds, T. J., Booth, J. K., & Keeffe, J. E. (2014). A comparative review of measurement instruments to inform and evaluate effectiveness of disability inclusive development. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 36(10), 804-812.
  22. UNESCO (2009). *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education*. Paris: UNESCO.
  23. UNESCO (2010). *EFA Global Monitoring Report*.
  24. *Education for All. Reaching the marginalized*. Retrieved on March, 29, 2013 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606E.pdf>.
  25. V Lal, B. (2012). *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. ANU Press.