

Se'i tatou 'aleaga: Samoan educators' insights into inclusive education development

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Abstract

This article discusses Samoan educators' perceptions about the inclusion of children with special needs in education today. It reports on an investigation into the development of education for people with disabilities. The study involved teacher trainees and educators in government, missions and private schools around the country examining their perceptions and discussing the pedagogies they use to successfully include children with special needs in mainstream schools. The research study aimed to find out what assistance is required to ensure children with special needs are included successfully in mainstream schools. This information is paramount to the work done with the training of teachers in this area. Perceptions and ideas from this study will help determine the way forward in the development of inclusive education in Samoa.

Keywords: special needs, inclusive education, reflective practice, action research

Introduction

Inclusive education is translated in Samoan language as *ā'oā'oga sāuo'o*, which simply means 'education that embraces everyone'. It represents an education system where, "...all children are welcomed and educated regardless of their gender, abilities or disabilities, economic situation, race or religious beliefs" (UNESCO, 1994, p.5).

Children with special needs continue to face difficulties wherever they are in the world. Whether those difficulties are with mobility, communication, obtaining an education or getting a job, it is inevitable that there will be some struggle along the way. Many of these obstacles exist as a result of negative attitudes towards individuals with special needs. With education, training for teachers, awareness programmes, exposure and experience, these attitudes can be changed. Many countries and organisations around the world continue to work collaboratively towards programmes and opportunities for these marginalised individuals.

At the global level, inclusive education has come to the fore since UNESCO's 1994 Salamanca Statement which emphasised the need for schools to accommodate all children regardless of their disabilities. The different countries that participated in this agreement stand together for the common goals of providing equal educational opportunities and the right for all children to be taught together with their non-disabled counterparts, and Samoa is no exception.

Inclusion is a term that expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. For inclusion to take place there are four key elements that must be considered, as encompassed in the following statement:

Inclusion is a process and it is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers. It also is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students in schools. Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement so therefore it is about creating a classroom environment that values diversity.

(Berberich & Lang, 1995, p10)

This means there should be no segregation, a barrier-free environment, learner-friendly classrooms, accessibility to all services, and provision of specific individual needs.

This whole idea of inclusion is quite challenging for teachers in Samoa, and programmes are in place to prepare and encourage educators in their practices to be more reflective in order to enhance inclusive education.

The culture in schools must first be changed for an inclusive, learning-friendly environment for all children to be provided. Schools should be safe, culturally aware, promote teacher development, and provide learning that is relevant to the children. They should also promote participation, cooperation and collaboration for all individuals, regardless of gender disparity. An inclusive learner-friendly school environment should promote healthy lifestyles and skills, involve parents and families, and include all children.

After fifteen years of being an educator in Samoa, and being exposed to the United Kingdom and European systems of inclusive education, I continue to reflect on my experience. As a lecturer and coordinator of the special needs education program at the National University of Samoa, I uphold the importance of being reflective in practice and thinking and to encourage action research within our own area of work. This study has allowed me to present my ideas and arguments about what needs to be changed for Samoan teachers in order for inclusive education to be achieved effectively.

People with disabilities in Samoa

Samoa is a small, democratic island nation located in the South Pacific, and is known for its kind and caring population of approximately 180,000. It has a strong culture and upholds religious beliefs that mostly influence the way people do things in everyday life. One of the beliefs that have been held for a long time in Samoa is that disabilities, both mental and physical, are a result of sin or wrong-doing by the parents at some point in their lives. Therefore, the child inflicts shame and embarrassment on the parents as their child is a tangible representation and constant reminder of sin. Although this belief does still exist in Samoa, during my research no individual directly expressed having this view-point, although many individuals mentioned it.

A recent survey, undertaken in 2009 by the Nuanua o le Alofa (NOLA), identified

4959 persons in Samoa with disabilities. Of these, 55% are males and 45% are females. About 75% of this population acquired their disabilities very recently (2-3 years ago). It is evident from the study conducted by NOLA that diabetes and old age are the common cause of disabilities for those aged 80 years and upwards.

For children aged 0-15 years, the causes of their disabilities are a combination of three factors: family accidents, car accidents and poor health care facilities during birth. Specific learning disabilities, such as epilepsy and deafness, have been identified as the common impairment for young people. What is significant is that most of these children have little or no access to proper health care facilities and limited or no access to education. Some have had access to only two-to-three years of primary school, some attended special needs schools, but many have never entered a classroom throughout their lives. The majority of the children's families have requested assistance so their children can be reintroduced into the education system and eventually use their learning to pursue careers, regardless of their disabilities. However, some young people with disabilities are not comfortable with going back to mainstream schooling and would prefer vocational and informal training with income generating programmes. They believe that, given an opportunity, they will be able to develop their talents and contribute effectively to the development of Samoa.

Current status of inclusive education in Samoa

The government of Samoa in its 'Strategy for Development of Samoa 2008-2012' highlights education's role in its vision to "Improve the quality of life for all", and emphasizes the need for a "quality holistic education system that recognizes the spiritual, cultural, intellectual and physical potential of all participants, enabling them to make fulfilling life choices" (Strategy for Development of Samoa, 2008, p10).

Furthermore, at the beginning of 2011, the government of Samoa launched and enforced the National Policy for People with Disabilities, as well as its Education Act, 2009. Both pieces of legislation provide guidance to the work of all government ministries and non-government organisations towards the inclusion of people with disabilities and their rights in all areas of national development. For instance, the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture (MESCC) has incorporated the goals and priority areas from these documents into its policy areas across all sub-sectors of education, to ensure its goal of improved education outcomes is achieved.

The government continues to support all efforts to improve the quality of life for all citizens of the country and, therefore, intends to enforce legislations, policies and all advocacy work towards the inclusion of people with disabilities in the country.

The non-governmental organisations continue to advocate for an improvement in the quality of life for people with disabilities, especially within education. The latest programme in this area is funded by the Australian government and is called the Samoa Inclusive Education Demonstration Program (SIEDP). It began in 2009 and will continue for five years. In two years, the SIEDP program has already had a positive impact on the lives of girls and boys with disability in Samoa. Successes in 2010 included the opportunity to have over 160 pre-school, primary and secondary students with disabilities access early intervention and support services, up from 11

in 2009 – a dramatic increase. The programme aims to support systemic change in regular educational providers, thus allowing children with disabilities to attend their local primary school (Lene, 2010).

Many other education developments and initiatives also provide professional support for teachers and educators in keeping them abreast with what is happening globally in inclusive education.

Teacher preparation for inclusive education

Samoa's Teachers' Training College, formerly known as TTC, was first established at the Malifa Compound, Apia, in 1939. In 1997, it was merged with the National University of Samoa, and the Faculty of Education took responsibility for pre-service teacher education. This is where all teachers in the country are prepared in the areas of: Early Childhood Education (ECE); Special Needs Education (SNE); and general teaching for both primary and secondary school.

Teacher trainees can now study towards a Diploma or Bachelor in Education and, since the year 2000, the inclusive education course has been made compulsory for all. This gives them an opportunity to learn about the various types of disabilities and an introduction to what inclusive education is. Those who may wish to major in special needs education can do so by studying five other major courses for a Diploma to support them with teaching children with special needs. This major programme began in 2000 and culminated in the first six graduates in special needs education, all of whom are still working in Samoa. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of teacher trainees with qualifications in special needs education and who are interested in this area of education (McCullough, 2005; World Education Forum 2000; Faamanatu, 2006), although it still has not solved the problem of lack of teachers in schools. The courses enable teacher trainees to explore the nature of inclusive education and its barriers, and to be exposed to designing individual education programs (IEP) and assessments strategies for disabled children.

Teacher trainees also have the opportunity to do educational activities for children at the paediatric ward at the national hospital, work with visiting friends from overseas, and to study several organizations for people with disabilities.



Fig 1.1 Student teachers in community – Reading to children at pediatric ward



Fig 1.2 Special Needs Group of teacher trainees 2011



Fig 1.3 Students with visiting friends



Fig 1.4 Teacher trainee doing educational activity for children at the hospital

By the end of 2011, there will be close to 50 graduate teachers who will have completed the Diploma of General Primary Education, majoring in Special Needs Education (SNE), since the beginning of this programme at the National University of Samoa. The majority of these graduates teach in regular primary schools, while a few have opted to teach in special needs schools like Loto Taumafai, Fiamalamalama and Senese. The choice of schools for teachers is mostly made by the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture. The special needs schools are all administered by non-governmental organizations and the salaries for teachers are less than those paid in government schools, hence the reason why most teachers of special needs continue to work in regular schools. The training sometimes is seen as under-utilised as there are only a few students with disabilities in regular government schools. In the near future, the government has promised to pay the salaries of all teachers working in special needs schools and early childhood education, as these areas are not currently covered by government. In the meantime annual grants are given to all these sectors of education to help with the salaries of teachers. Teachers who have not been through the training for special needs education have been able to cope by using a teachers' manual which was published in 2003, and provides a guide for teachers in regular schools towards inclusive education.

Having all these support mechanisms in place does not guarantee effective inclusive education in Samoan schools, however, and teachers often find themselves facing criticism and high expectations. Regardless of all the training, awareness programmes and resources available, there are still some basic necessities for teachers that should be addressed in order to raise the standard of inclusion to another level.

Teachers are always at the centre of international community attention when it comes to reforms in education, but there is often ignorance about the role of teachers in educational change (Faamanatu, 2006). This was shown in a report by the 1995

World Bank Education Sector Review of six options for reforming educational systems without dealing with teachers (Thaman, 2001). Moreover, for a country to improve its quality of education and ensure successful inclusion of children with disabilities, many educational researchers argue that there should be emphasis placed on action research for teachers, educators and policy makers (Ainscow, 2005; Dewey, 1993; Ponte, P., 2003; Thousand & Villa, 2000).

The Purpose of this Research Study

An important part of the Salamanca Statement was its urging of the governments of all countries to:

Ensure that, in a context of systematic change, teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, address the provision of special needs education in inclusive schools. (UNESCO, 1994, p 2)

Samoa has committed to taking measures and developing plans to ensure teacher preparedness for inclusion. However, there are still some weaknesses in the system and, therefore, there is a need to consolidate ideas and theories in relation to practice, thus closing the gap. Although there may be several other factors that may hinder full inclusion, it is argued here that teachers play an important role and are the most influential figures in the learning environment for these students. There is a need to change teachers' perceptions and cultural beliefs, and to update teaching methods via more collaboration, more practical courses for training, and by continuously reflecting on current practices.

Fifteen years of teaching experience, and five years of lecturing in this area and collaborating with organizations working with disabled children, have allowed me to substantiate ideas about teachers and inclusive education in Samoa. My main aim is to contribute to the training of more competent teachers at the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa, improve programmes and courses for teacher trainees, ensure sustainability in inclusive education progress, and continue to sensitize educators and policy makers in the country with education development towards inclusion.

My involvement as a board and advisory member for Loto Taumafai since 2006, Special Olympics Samoa 2009, and SIEDP, has enabled me to learn more about education, activities and development for children with disabilities. Also, my exposure to European and United Kingdom schools and community encouraged me to take action research and be a reflective practitioner in the area of inclusive education.

Research participants and questions

In this research, in order to investigate what is going on in Samoa for people with disabilities, I targeted people working in schools, family members, the relevant ministry officials, and organisations for people with disabilities. I was interested in finding out participants' responses to the following questions:

1. What do you think of inclusive education development in this country?
2. Is there a change in attitude and perceptions about children with disabilities?
3. What pedagogies are used by teachers in handling children with disabilities?

Methodology

Every year since 2002, I have had the opportunity to visit schools for special needs during teaching trainee practice, or through other educational projects and research. I was able to record most of these experiences and observations. I also conducted interviews with my student teachers who are currently studying and some graduates

who are doing part-time courses. Questionnaires were also distributed to educators in schools on both islands of Upolu and Savaii.

One methodological approach to this study was *talanoa*. The *talanoa* method is widely used where the researcher and participants share not only their time and interests, but also their emotions. This has to be done in culturally appropriate procedures for it to be effectively used. *Talanoa* is an oceanic word for telling stories. The emphasis in *talanoa* lies in the depth of the art of listening. Communication and dialogue in the context of *talanoa* becomes sacramental when quality listening is honoured. *Talanoa* at its best ensures that voices are heeded, honoured and celebrated (Otsuka, 2006; Halapua, 2008).

Findings

This study revealed that most initiatives aimed at assisting or improving the lives of People With Disabilities (PWD) are begun by the private sector, NGOs, and regional or international organizations. Although government ministries in Samoa provide assistance during specific projects or endeavours, they are not structured to handle matters dealing with persons with disabilities exclusively. The initiatives have provided essential information and opportunities for knowledge of specific disabilities, causes, preventions, and effective strategies for empowering teachers to work with children with disabilities and their families.

From interviews and *talanoa* sessions with educators, I found that there is a change in traditional beliefs and attitudes. The many programmes in the country for people with disabilities have led to a more positive approach and attitude to teaching these children, compared to ten years ago. Most teachers who have recently graduated from National University of Samoa have a more positive attitude towards inclusive education development and children with special needs than those who have been teaching for a long time – 10 years or more. All agreed with the importance of professional development and awareness programmes as major contributing factors in enhancing their potentials and abilities to cope with these children.

The elimination of national exams for Year 8, which will happen in 2012, is another factor that will see the increase in positive attitudes and approaches towards successful inclusion – this was seen as another barrier to children with special needs being fully included. In 2011, the government has also enforced the Compulsory Education Act of 2009, together with the School Fees Grant Scheme, which enables all children in primary schools to access education for free, and encourages parents and the community to educate all children.

Teachers have also been empowered through training to think positively, and change their traditional attitudes and beliefs towards children with special needs. In schools, there is less corporal punishment and teachers tend to reward good behavior, thus developing positive teacher-learner relationships and improving student behavior. Teachers have changed to using more inclusive-friendly approaches and pedagogies to encourage inclusion at all levels. The use of Individual Education Programs – IEP – is common, and buddying a child with a disability with a non-disabled child is another method frequently used.

It can be seen that since the work of a number of NGOs in the 1960s, special needs education has received increased attention from both the general public and the government. Although negative attitudes still exist among many parents and untrained teachers, there are a growing number of individuals who stand apart and who are working to improve conditions for special needs children.

Many teachers, in the rural areas particularly, lack adequate experience teaching children with special needs, and because of distance, finances and lack of interest, rural children are often unable to attend specialised schools. Comparing the education of a child with special needs in a rural primary school to a child in a specialised school, such as Senese, reveals sharp differences in insights and attitudes.

Reflections

It is clear that there are many struggles for children with special needs in obtaining a successful education through lack of general knowledge, resources, transportation and teacher training. However, as Samoa changes and moves out of the 'least developed country' category, attitudes towards disabilities are similarly changing and improving. With the assistance of international aid programmes in inclusive education, teachers who are educated in the needs of students with disabilities, and increased community awareness, special needs students are looking at a brighter future and more positive attitudes.

My years of teaching and training, as well as being affiliated with several local and international organizations, have really encouraged me to continue advocating for inclusive education. I have been able to improve the quality and learning experiences of teacher trainees in special needs courses by increasing exposure to the practicality of theories studied. I have also been involved in action research and realized the importance of being a reflective practitioner as I learn from all the struggles and successes I have had along the way.

It is contended here that if an individual teacher develops knowledge through interaction, it will make him/her contribute more to the strength of collective knowledge developed with colleagues and peers. This should be encouraged for Samoan teachers as there is a need for more collaboration and understanding in order to cater for the students integrated into schools, and to reduce doubts and misconceptions amongst educators. Networking and collaboration will encourage mentoring and team teaching, peer buddy systems, and specialists working with teachers in planning, designing, monitoring and making decisions to ensure needs of the students are met (Thousand & Villa, 2000; Ponte, 2003). The more teachers network and collaborate, the more it allows them to adjust teaching methods, reduce isolation and competition, and increase confidence to promote interactive learning strategies with their students, accommodating their specific needs.

Educators need to lead the way in making sure the children with special needs are welcomed into an inclusive learning-friendly environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study reported on in this article shows that there is a need for organisations catering for special needs children to work collaboratively and closely with schools and educators in identifying the needs of these children, and in updating the relevant data about the new referrals and cases for teachers to assist with inclusion. This will also help to reduce discrimination amongst children and teachers towards children with disabilities.

There is also a strong need for teachers and educators to continue to strengthen action research in the critical areas of teaching and learning because it will help provide the necessary information needed to enhance professionalism in education.

For educators to change and improve attitudes, some have suggested incentives for teachers who are working with children with profound needs. These incentives could be either financial or through more training opportunities overseas to increase the amount of expertise in this area, rather than depending on foreign donors for assistance and volunteers. Although these are appreciated they hinder the sustainability of inclusive education development in Samoa.

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