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Addressing barriers to implementing inclusive education in the Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Countries of the Pacific region are currently undergoing significant reforms. While disability inclusive education has been identified as a regional priority by all member nations, implementing inclusive education in the countries of the region can be quite challenging as many barriers continue to hamper the progress of the countries. Unless the barriers are identified and systematically addressed, it is unlikely that the countries will be able to implement a robust and holistic inclusive education strategy. In this paper, we present possible ways in which the countries of the Pacific could make significant progress in implementing a sustainable inclusive education strategy. We used a collaborative approach of co-examining potential barriers that are likely to impede the growth of countries in implementing a comprehensive inclusive education plan of action. We then identified possible strategies that are likely to result in an improved and perhaps more culturally responsive implementation of inclusive education in the Pacific. The most significant barriers identified by the members included: inadequate teacher preparation, stigma and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, and limited engagement with the local leaders and key stakeholders. Possible strategies for addressing the barriers are outlined and discussed with possible implications for local, regional, and international researchers and policy makers.

KEYWORDS

Pacific island countries; inclusive education; barriers; strategies

Introduction

The fate of a child with a disability is decided the moment he or she is born in the Pacific Islands Countries. The chance that he or she will attend a school is very slim. Out of 10 such children, only one is likely to receive any form of education (PIFS 2009). The Secretary General, Pacific Forum Secretariat in her opening statement of the regional framework, declared that ‘persons with disabilities constitute one of the most marginalised population groups in the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Countries … [and] represent approximately 15% of all national populations’ (PIFS 2016). One way the countries of
the Pacific region are trying to address the issues of marginalisation and poor education to children with disabilities is by advocating for inclusive education across the region (PIFS 2009, 2016). Although difficult to adequately define, inclusive education can broadly be conceptualised as the formation of enabling learning spaces that are concerned with the diverse educational needs of all children, regardless of factors such as race, socio economic background, gender, disability, and so on (Ainscow and César 2006; Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). A key focus of this paper is on the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. As the countries of the Pacific increasingly advocate for inclusion, we recognise that social change occurs within a contested space and the reality for many who do not fit into the concept of ‘normal’ continues to be one of exclusion (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). Whilst there are some similarities among countries regarding the meaning of inclusive education, culture plays a larger role in the conceptualisation and subsequently in the implementation of inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow 2016; Mitchell 2005; Webber and Lupart 2011).

Pacific countries have long recognised the importance of moving toward inclusive educational practices; however, barriers to implementation remain an issue that requires attention (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Miles, Lene, and Merumeru 2014; Page et al. 2018; Sharma and Michael 2017). Local and international researchers have identified some barriers that continue to hamper progress within the Pacific countries in implementing a sustainable form of inclusive education. Lack of adequate preparation of teachers (Page et al. 2018; Sharma and Michael 2017), inadequate resourcing (Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016), and attitudinal barriers (Darrow 2009; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Page et al. 2018; Sharma and Michael 2017) are amongst the most frequently identified barriers. Some of the local Pacific researchers have raised concerns that inclusive education is seen as an externally driven agenda and there is insufficient commitment from local key stakeholders to implement and monitor inclusive education policies and practices (Bines and Lei 2011; Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016).

The colonial approach to implementing inclusive education involves taking the values of the Western world and exporting them to classrooms within the Pacific, with little or no regard for its impact on the local culture (Ainscow and Miles 2008; Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010; Phillips 2015). Furthermore, previous research has highlighted the concerns raised by community members who feel that their voices have been excluded from conversations on inclusive education in the Pacific (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013). These externally imposed values and policies have justifiably created tensions, confusion, and resistance to implementation within the Pacific (Sharma and Michael 2017). Whilst it may be useful to draw on research from other countries, the way in which this knowledge is transferred or exported to the Pacific context undoubtedly needs to be examined (Bines and Lei 2011; Moyo 2009; Phillips 2015). Outside of easily visible factors such as language, and accessibility to resources and technology, there are more complex elements that need to be considered. Not only does culture influence teaching practices but it also influences the understanding and interpretation of the concept of inclusive education itself (Booth and Ainscow 2016; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Poasa, Mallinckrodt, and Suzuki 2000). If external as well as internal policies and suggested practices do not support self-determination and alignment with local values, the likelihood of acceptance and implementation of inclusive education could be significantly slowed down (Armstrong, Armstrong, and...
Spandagou 2011; Bines and Lei 2011; Le Fanu 2013; Page et al. 2018). The concerns raised by the Pacific stakeholders about policies that are borrowed from other contexts are not any different from those raised by researchers in other low-income country contexts (Moyo 2009; Phillips 2015). Thus, if the goal is to implement effective and sustainable inclusive educational practices in the Pacific, contextually driven approaches that create classrooms that are reflective of the diverse learners within Pacific Island Countries is absolutely necessary (Le Fanu 2013; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013). These contextually driven practices may be achieved by collaborating with local community members and leaders during the development stage (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010). It has been argued that a local Pacific strategy that builds upon the Indigenous knowledge combined with best practices in inclusive education could be a more feasible way to implement inclusive education across the region (Miles, Lene, and Merumeru 2014).

**Understanding the context**

It is important to recognise that countries of the region are unique in many ways. For example, most Pacific nations have relatively small populations. The nations are spread over a large geographical area, approximately 15% of the earth’s surface area (World Bank 2018). The region is fragile having been exposed to the effects of climate change, rising temperatures, warming seas, rising sea levels accompanied by coastal flooding and erosion, and extreme weather patterns. In recent years, cyclones have devastated many countries of the region (e.g. Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu). Regardless of this fragility, the countries of the Pacific region have been undergoing significant educational reforms and the education of students with disabilities is a key regional priority and the countries remain highly committed to implementing inclusive education. The countries, recognising their fragility, have chosen to work together with other nations in the region within the ambit of the Pacific Framework for Regionalism through which, for example, they could maximise the use of their resources. It is, therefore, not surprising to note that many countries have similar national policies and frameworks to support the implementation of inclusive education. The countries also formally collaborate through co-developing regional frameworks and identifying regional strategies to implement the regional and national frameworks and policies. In 2009, the Pacific Regional Strategy on Disability 2011–2015 (PRSD) was developed with a specific activity for working with the Ministries of Education to implement inclusive education across the Pacific (PIFS 2009). The PRSD raised concerns that over 90% of children with disabilities are out of school and do not have access to any form of education. The Pacific Islands Ministers of Education endorsed the Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF) (PIFS 2009) and identified the education of children with disabilities as a key priority. They also endorsed a rights-based, inclusive approach to disability and education. The member nations adopted the PEDF and have agreed to work towards disability inclusive education at a regional level (PIFS 2009). At their meeting in 2014, the Forum Education Ministers tasked the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to work in collaboration with partners to develop a regional inclusive education framework to address the concerns related to the barriers to and challenges of implementing inclusive education and educating children with diverse needs such as those with learning difficulties and disabilities in
the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Many countries of the region have signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and their governments are obligated under the treaty to implement inclusive education policies and practices. However, the Pacific context poses many unique challenges. PIFS, in response to the Ministers’ request, developed a concept note of the Pacific Regional Framework on Inclusive Education. These initiatives would form the basis of discussion and consultation across the region before finalisation and approval for implementation in the Pacific Islands Countries.

Inclusive education has gained prominence within and across the PICs in the national and regional public policy processing discourses. However, translating policies into practices has not been straightforward and it is critical to identify the barriers faced by PICs in implementing regional and national policies on inclusion. In this paper we discuss key barriers that hamper the progress of countries and suggest strategies that could be used to overcome and successfully implement the inclusive education agenda across the region.

**Method**

A collaborative approach of co-examining potential barriers that were likely to impede growth of countries in implementing a comprehensive inclusive education plan of action was used. We then identified possible strategies that were likely to result in a more culturally sensitive approach in the implementation of inclusive education in the Pacific. Each member of the team was tasked with identifying barriers and potential strategies at three levels (micro – Classroom and schools; meso – Village and community; macro – Systems or regional or national) and then a consolidated list of barriers and strategies was developed with possible implications of the findings for policymakers, researchers, and funding agencies in the region. The Bronfenbrenner’s Development Ecology Model (Bronfenbrenner 1979) was deemed appropriate for this research as it required us to review the barriers and strategies at all three levels (micro, meso, and macro) that have relevance to implementing international policy initiatives that are pertinent to the individual child and his or her family. We believed providing information using this framework will ensure the findings can be used in a more holistic way to examine the barriers and possible strategies.

The project used a slightly different approach from most typical research projects to collect data where researchers played the dual role of participants and researchers sharing insider and outside perspectives. This approach is not new and is frequently used by ethnographers (see for example Pollner and Emerson 2001). We were aware from the outset of an inherent imbalance in the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. Thus, each team member was asked to be as objective as possible in identifying barriers and strategies without consulting each other. While we cannot claim to have addressed all major issues that may blur boundaries between the researcher and participants, we hope that the findings would be useful for local and international researchers as well as policymakers in the region. We hope the paper will also contribute to the literature on the subject in the region and will create a space for further engagement and debate on the implementation of inclusive education in the region.

Data in this project were collected using a blank template with four rows and three columns. The rows identified three different levels (micro – Classroom and schools; meso – Village and community; macro – Systems or regional or national) and the
columns were labelled as Barriers and Strategies. The three levels in our template aligned with three levels proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The use of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework was considered appropriate for analysis as the three levels identified in the framework provided appropriate levels that have relevance in the Pacific context. All participants were aware that the Pacific cultural values need to be integrated across all three levels rather than identified in one level within the framework. It is important to highlight that when we asked our team members to identify barriers and strategies, we emphasised the need to consider the Pacific context as the foundation to the analysis. In this regard, it is important to note that within the Pacific the child and the family (rather than just ‘the child’) were at the core of the analysis. Each of the listed authors, except the research assistant, were asked to complete the template, identifying barriers and strategies at the three levels based on their extensive experience in the field of inclusive education and within the Pacific region. The authors identified barriers and strategies based on their personal experiences of working in different roles across the Pacific. The tables created by each member were not shared with other members prior to analysis. At micro level members identified factors at class and school levels; at meso level they identified factors at village and community levels; and at macro level they identified factors at system, national, and regional levels. An example of a completed analysis from one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micro level – classrooms and schools</td>
<td>• Lack of Inclusive Education Policy at school level. &lt;br&gt;• Lack of proper facilities that would support the learning of children with disabilities in schools and classrooms. For example, proper sanitation, ramps, lack of proper playgrounds facilities, proper signs on buildings for all students. &lt;br&gt;• Teachers’ attitudes and lack of knowledge and understanding on inclusive education. &lt;br&gt;• Lack of trained teachers on IE, teaching in school. &lt;br&gt;• Negative attitudes from parents and other students.</td>
<td>• Recommend that all schools need to have an Inclusive Education policy. &lt;br&gt;• Schools need to include facilities that would support IE in their School’s Development budget for funding. &lt;br&gt;• Include teaching and learning resources in the school’s budget for funding. &lt;br&gt;• Provide training for teachers through pre-service and in-service training. &lt;br&gt;• Provide more Education and Awareness about IE to parents and the school community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meso level – village / community</td>
<td>• Negative attitudes of people in the community. &lt;br&gt;• Lack of knowledge and understanding about IE.</td>
<td>• Negative attitudes and lack of knowledge and understanding about IE can be addressed through Community Education and Awareness programs about the Rights of PWD and IE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro level – systems, or regional /national level</td>
<td>• Lack of adequate Policy at Regional, National and Provincial level. &lt;br&gt;• Inadequate funding allocated for IE from Regional and National and Provincial level. &lt;br&gt;• IE not regarded as priority at national level in a few Pacific Islands countries.</td>
<td>• Develop strong policies at Regional, National and Provincial level that would support IE in the region and within countries. &lt;br&gt;• Regional bodies like the Forum Secretariat need to liaise with member countries so that countries can factor funding for IE in the Government’s National budget through their Ministry of Education. &lt;br&gt;• Awareness about IE needs to be done at national level through presentations for our national leaders and other stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The completed tables were thematically analysed by the research assistant. Thematic analysis is ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). The research assistant examined each barrier and strategy at each of the three levels (micro, meso, and macro) and coded barriers that were similar under one category. She then examined strategies suggested by the members to address different barriers. Various strategies identified the members were coded in separate categories. The findings arising from the thematic analysis (at all three levels) were shared with the rest of the researchers. The members made minor changes if it appeared necessary to convey the key messages. Themes at micro, meso, and macro levels are reported separately in Tables 2–4.

### Results

The data collected from each of the researchers revealed several key themes across each of the three levels (micro, meso, and macro). At the micro level (i.e. within the classroom or school level) (see Table 2), the three key themes evident as barriers to inclusion were a lack of teacher capability, a lack of adequate resources, and the existence of negative attitudes.

A lack of teacher capability was linked to the manifestation of poor pedagogies in the classroom. Several key strategies were identified by researchers to counteract the barrier of inadequate preparation of teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms. Improving the quality of in-service teacher education and leadership programmes was identified as a key...
strategy. A need to develop school-based professional development programmes aimed at preparing and continually monitoring the progress of leaders and teachers was identified. It was envisaged that this approach would ensure that teachers were able to consistently meet the needs of all students. Another key theme that was closely linked to poor teaching pedagogies was negative attitudes and stigma towards children with disabilities. School-based professional development programmes addressing negative attitudes were recommended as a possible strategy to address this barrier.

In order to address the lack of adequate resources, the countries of the region need to apply an inclusive education funding model with budgets that address adequacy and equity while maximising the use of local resources. In this regard, the model could be based on population demographics where it would be a necessary requirement to network closely with local non-government organisations (NGOs) and existing special schools.

A colonial mentality was noted to have permeated classrooms, which indicates a lack of inclusion of local culture in the classroom. This may be addressed by locating the curriculum in the Pacific context and using elements of the local cultures in the teaching and learning environment. Engaging local community leaders and elders in the activities of the school could facilitate the embracing of inclusive education across schools. Developing a school-based inclusive education plan could also be used to address many of the barriers at the micro levels.

At the meso level several key themes emerged as barriers to inclusion (see Table 3). Disability within the community was stigmatised. Inadequate teacher preparation programmes at the university level, and a lack of adequate infrastructure were also identified. In order to combat negativity and raise awareness in support of inclusive practices within the community, researchers suggested the development of community education and awareness building programmes using multi-media drives. These would support and promote the engagement of community leaders and increase the representation of those with disabilities in local community activities. These approaches would assist in bridging the gap between communities and schools and create a more cohesive understanding of the importance of inclusive education. Poor teacher education programmes, which subsequently leads to a lack of teacher capability and poor teaching pedagogies at the micro level, was also flagged as a barrier by all researchers at the meso level. Researchers suggested that there needed to be a re-conceptualisation of education in order to enhance the quality of teacher education. Inclusive education should not be perceived an add-on. Rather, inclusive education should be equated with quality education and understood as integral to education since we are all different with differing learning needs. Improving education at a tertiary level should include performance reviews to monitor pre-service teacher readiness to enter the classroom. Finally, a lack of adequate infrastructure within the community was highlighted as an important factor that created a barrier to inclusive education in the Pacific. This may be addressed through adequate planning that focuses on improving transportation and mobility to facilitate access for those with additional needs.

At the macro level, several key themes emerged such as unclear and externally imposed policies rooted in a colonial mentality, a lack of adequate funding, and a lack of commitment to inclusive education at the government and ministerial levels (see Table 4). Concerns surrounding the inadequacy of current policies appeared to be a consistent theme by
all researchers. Developing a policy implementation plan that provides continued support during implementation could mitigate unclear policies. In terms of funding, there is a need for governments to commit to a reasonable percentage of their Gross National Product towards funding for inclusive education in their national budgets. A lack of government commitment was the final theme that appeared amongst some of the comments made by the researchers. It was suggested that given this may be due to a lack of awareness of inclusive education and externally imposed values, it may be helpful to raise awareness of inclusive education at a national level (e.g. meeting with national leaders and stakeholders to provide information and presentations on the benefits of inclusive education). Pacific voices should be at the centre of the creation of all policies (e.g. community leaders, individuals with disabilities and additional needs), which may in turn increase the willingness of governments to adopt these policies. For far too long, there has been a history of policies being ‘helicoptered’ in to ‘fix’ the problem.

Discussion
This research has attempted to identify barriers and suggest strategies that could be used to address barriers to inclusive education within the Pacific region. It is important to acknowledge a limitation of the research. This manuscript systematically captured voices of a small group of researchers who have worked across the Pacific region as well as in other spaces. While we do not claim that we have identified all barriers or that our strategies are the best ways of addressing the issues, we have had over 65 years of combined experience of working across the Pacific as university educators, policy makers, school educators, and researchers. We hope our findings may have useful implications for a variety of stakeholders who are willing to implement inclusive education within the region.

Our data showed that in order to successfully implement inclusive education within the Pacific region, five major issues needed to be addressed.

Reducing gaps between policy and practice
Most countries of the Pacific have national policies on inclusive education (PIFS 2009, 2016). There are two aspects that need to be closely examined. First, it is critical that policies are relevant to the context and, second, each policy should have a well-defined implementation plan. Some researchers have criticised the over-reliance on importing inclusion policies from Western countries that may have limited or no relevance to the local contexts (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010; Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011; Tomlinson 2017). Phillips (2015) has criticised the idea of borrowing policies from other countries and implementing them in a new context. Any policy that fails to pay close attention to the local context has limited chances of being successful. While inclusive education is appropriate and perhaps the only way possible to provide quality education to learners with disabilities across the region, it cannot be denied that the impetus to implement this mandate did not originate in the Pacific. A policy largely influenced by Western countries and mandated by international organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF is unlikely to be implemented as many of the ideas and concepts are too distant from the realities of the Pacific. It may mean that policy designers work
closely with the Pacific stakeholders to develop culturally relevant and sensitive policies. Alternatively, the existing policies could be revised by local researchers who have extensive knowledge of the Pacific region as well as of inclusive education initiatives. One good example of such an approach is evident in the Cook Islands where a local Pacific Islander updated the inclusive education policy (Merumeru 2011). The revised policy had a much wider acceptance within the country as a result of nationwide consultations before its finalisation. Each national policy should also be accompanied with an action plan co-designed with policy implementers (e.g. teacher educators, school educators, and members of Disabled People Organisations [DPOs]). This approach is culturally sensitive and responsive to the region where local stakeholders are committed to finding solutions to implement the local policy imperative.

**Authentic engagement of key Pacific stakeholders within the countries**

Implementation of an inclusive education strategy can be a complex undertaking. It requires significant change in the ways schools have been functioning in the past (Le Fanu 2013). School educators who work in a Pacific context are aware that they need to change the way they educate all children in inclusive classrooms (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013). However, they are not fully confident about the approaches that should be used. It is also the case that international consultants are employed to develop solutions to local problems without them having prior experience within the region or being fully aware of the range of issues being experienced in each country/province/region. One solution would be to engage knowledgeable Pacific Islanders to either undertake the tasks of designing culturally sensitive inclusive education approaches or at least work closely to contextually advise international consultants. If it is not possible to identify local experts in the area of inclusive education, then the external consultants should work closely with the local stakeholders to develop inclusive education programmes for schools. These programmes should be monitored and periodically evaluated to ensure efficacy.

**Teacher preparedness and adequate resourcing**

Limited access to adequate resources for teachers and parents and a lack of teacher preparedness have both been raised as major concerns regarding the implementation of inclusive education in the region (Leyser and Kirk 2004; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Page et al. 2018; Sharma and Michael 2017). Regardless of their willingness to include learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, teachers often feel ill equipped to teach students with special educational needs, both in terms of their training and access to teaching resources (Sharma and Michael 2017). Page et al. (2018), in their in-depth study with 10 in-service teachers in Cook Islands, also found that teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities. Teachers, in their study, believed that in order for them to be able to teach students with a disability, it was necessary for teachers to know the diagnosis of the student. Recent research in this regard shows that teachers do not necessarily need to know about the diagnosis of a student to teach a student (Sharma 2018). They, however, do need to know how each student is different and how best each students’ learning differences could be accommodated. Some
researchers from the Pacific have reported that parents are often concerned about the lack of resources available to assist them in preparing their children to enter the classroom, particularly regarding personal finances to pay school fees and a lack of adequate transport that would allow their children to attend school (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013). Previous research has highlighted strategies to overcome these barriers such as school-based professional development (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Page et al. 2018; Sharma and Michael 2017), improvement in teacher education programmes at a tertiary level (Sharma and Michael 2017), and using local resources and collaborating with other schools and local non-government organisations (NGOs) to maximise efficient use of the resources (McConkey 2014).

One critical aspect that requires serious attention is the curriculum and pedagogy that would be suitable for in-service and pre-service educators to learn. A number of researchers have written on this topic (see for example EADSNE 2010). Information about characteristics of children with disabilities and causes of disability should be avoided (Davis and Florian 2004). In-service and pre-service teachers should learn about how each child is different in the way he or she learns and how best the learning activities could be designed to ensure that each child could learn in an inclusive classroom (Sharma et al. 2013). They should also learn about how best to motivate all children and to assess student learning. Specific skills to address the learning needs of students with very specific needs (e.g. learning to read and write Braille, using sign language) may not be possible for all teachers to learn. However, all teachers should learn about how best they can work with local NGOs or how best to collaborate with special schools to teach and support students who have diverse learning needs. Key criteria for improving in-service and pre-service teacher education should be the range of pedagogies that could be employed in teaching situations as well as the content necessary to teach in inclusive classrooms. Teachers also need to be taught how to access the information on legitimate websites as well as from local NGOs and colleagues within the education system. School leaders need to be supported in reviewing the ethos of the schools so that the learning spaces could be progressively transformed into positive and supportive cultural institutions. The focus should be on how best the content could be delivered that it results in changing educators’ beliefs (i.e. heart), knowledge (i.e. head), and actual classroom practices (i.e. hands) (Florian and Rouse 2009). No teacher preparedness programme is complete without modelling of behaviours with mentoring support to ensure professional growth. Adequate monitoring should also be built into the framework to ensure that the classroom practices are appropriate and that a wholesome ethos is allowed to flourish within and across schools.

Addressing stigma and attitudinal barriers

Another significant barrier to implementing inclusive educational practices in the Pacific Island Countries has been attitudinal barriers, particularly the negative stigma often associated with disabilities (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Sharma and Michael 2017). Some parents noted feeling ashamed about having a child with a disability whilst others were concerned about potential discriminatory treatment of their child in mainstream classrooms by teachers, parents, and students without disabilities (Sharma and Michael 2017). Teachers are not immune to discriminatory attitudes that can lead to poor treatment and lower expectations of students with disabilities (Miles, Lene, and
Given the strong link between teacher expectations and academic achievement, this is undoubtedly an area that needs to be addressed if we are to achieve genuine inclusive educational practices (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton 2006). Potential strategies to combat these issues are school-based professional development for teachers and leaders and engaging community leaders in awareness building (Sharma and Michael 2017) along with mentoring and monitoring to support the development of wholesome inclusive practices.

**Collaboration within and across the Pacific nations**

Inclusive education has been identified as a key priority for all member nations of the Pacific (PIFS 2009) and the availability of limited human and material resources have necessitated the need for the nations to use existing resources efficiently and to collaborate with other nations in a number of areas (PIFS 2009). The Pacific nations negotiate their priorities and collaborate formally through the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. There are many successful examples of how PIFS has supported collaboration across the region to implement national and regional policies. It is envisaged that PIFS could continue to play a more active role in supporting nations of the region to implement a sustainable inclusive education programme. It can undertake a scoping study to first identify the strengths of different countries with regard to the implementation of inclusive education frameworks and policies. It can, then, develop national and regional strategies and programmes of action to promote collaboration across the region. These approaches will in turn filter to the community level within each country and support the integration of more culturally appropriate strategies.

**Conclusion**

Whilst previous attempts to implement sustainable inclusive educational practices in Pacific Island Countries have been made, there are still barriers that have thwarted its progress. These barriers are mainly situated around perceived teacher and leadership support, a lack of community awareness, and external involvement that does not consider the Pacific context (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013). Previous studies highlight the necessity of systematic changes to accommodate children with disabilities into classrooms as opposed to segregated schooling (Sharma and Michael 2017). Research also highlights the utility of taking cultural context into account and working collaboratively with community leaders and members (Bines and Lei 2011).

We cannot expect Pacific countries to implement inclusive educational practices if we are not operating from an inclusive paradigm (Le Fanu 2013). A relevant question that needs to be addressed in the Pacific is: ‘What does it really mean to have an education system that is “inclusive”?’ (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011, 30). One principle that should guide efforts of any agency or individual interested in implementing inclusive education in the region is ‘nothing about us, without us’. Applying this principle in its true sense will mean that people from the Pacific need to be true partners in jointly identifying, defining, and solving problems that the countries of the region face in implementing inclusive education. It is only through adoption of this principle that we can develop a strategy that will have wider appeal across
the region and will be culturally sensitive and responsive to the local context. It should also be noted that whilst there are similarities between Pacific countries, there are also vast differences in language, culture, religion, and so on that should also be considered in order to maximise the effectiveness of inclusive education in the Pacific region (Sharma and Michael 2017). It is only when we consider the similarities and the differences together and engage with the realities of schools and the education systems, whilst understanding and appreciating the specific historical and cultural traditions of the Pacific Island Countries, can we move forward with a broad understanding of inclusion and support meaningful change that is underpinned by self-determination (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010; Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). More than ever, we need to support the development of an ‘… inclusive, barrier free and rights based society … which embraces the diversity of all Pacific Peoples’ (PIFS 2016, 10). Taken together, these intercultural and collaborative strategies could assist PICs in moving forward in the implementation of sustainable inclusive education policies and practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Laisiasa Merumeru has worked in inclusive education policy and practice across the Pacific Island Countries over the past 17 years. Over the past 6 years, he was the Disability Coordination Officer (DCO) with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS). He is currently working in Inclusive Education at the School of Education, University of the South Pacific where he is contributing to the re-conceptualisation of inclusive education courses. Lai has also published widely on inclusive education in the Pacific.

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Hannah Yared is a Master of Psychology (Educational and Developmental) and Doctor of Philosophy candidate at Monash University, Australia where she is involved with various inclusive education and developmental psychology projects. Her main research interests include: social-cognitive
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