



Fiji

Filipe Bole
Minister for Education,
National Heritage, Culture & Arts, Youth & Sports



Currently Minister for Education, National Heritage, Culture & Arts, Youth & Sports, Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment, Local Government, Urban Development, Housing and Environment. A Consultant and a Senior Fellow of the Centre for International and Regional Affairs (CIRA), at the University of Fiji. Appointed Director of the Centre for Indigenous Studies, University of Fiji, March 2007. Was a Secondary School Teacher with a MA (History) from Victoria University, Wellington and Dip Teaching (Auckland Teachers College). Has had extensive experience in policy formulation, approval and implementation in education, foreign relations and external trade, tourism and aviation and planning. Dealt with these areas as a senior government official and as a Cabinet Minister for 14 years between 1985-1999. Also had experience

in directing research on issues affecting Pacific Island countries when Director of the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Centre, Hawaii. Well-informed about the FIC and had co-authored papers on regional cooperation in the South Pacific and chaired a study on the Solomon Islands under the auspices of the Forum Eminent Persons Group in June 2002. Joined the Fiji Service in June 1980 and posted as Fiji's Permanent Representative at the United Nations in New York. UN appointment was held jointly with posts of Ambassador to the United States and High Commissioner to Canada. Appointed Director of the Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP) at the East-West Centre, Hawaii in November 1983 – directed research on issues nominated by heads (Prime Ministers and Presidents) of Pacific Island Governments.

"Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future"

One of the defining characteristics of our society is their inclusiveness in the sense that everyone has a place, a traditional role to play in the community, and everyone is expected to participate in communal life and have a share of the land and its resources. Together is our philosophy of life. 2007 was a significant for special education in Fiji, a country with a population of nearly a million people as it marked the 40th anniversary of its humble beginnings here.

On our legal framework now in place, the provision of the Social Justice Act of 2001 approved the Ministry of Education's affirmative actions on special education, A 10-year action plan for 2003–2013. Within this framework, is the inclusion of equal opportunities for employment. Since 2003, the Education Ministry has provided \$F100,000.00 annually to a local non-Government organization, Project HEAVEN, to administer hearing and visual testing for all children in primary schools and now progressing to secondary schools throughout Fiji. The 2000 Education Commission Report stated that 10% of primary and secondary school students have learning disability, reflected in many of these children facing reading disabilities.

Our 17 special education schools cater for more than 2,700 students with physical, hearing, visual and intellectual impairment. Staffing comprises local civil servants, specialist teachers from Japan's JOCV/JICA and volunteers from the United Kingdom and Australia. Embracing the spirit of compassion and social justice, some of our other schools in Fiji have, for over three decades now, accommodated children with special needs, thus fulfilling part of their school ethos lately, other schools have also received students with disabilities, an



indicator of the support and understanding of school managements and staff. It is also a strong indicator of educational awareness by advocates and people with disabilities themselves.

In 1993, special education was introduced as a compulsory unit of study at one of our local teacher training institutions to prepare teachers to adequately respond to the needs of such children. For children who are capable, they learn the regular primary school curriculum and sit its public examinations, and if they qualify, they do likewise at the secondary level. Specialized areas of the curriculum specific to special education are taught from birth to 8 years for the Early Intervention Programmes, which include work with parents and families, the Health Ministry and other stakeholders.

Our new National Curriculum Framework is inclusive of children with special needs. To us, the visibility of disability issues is very important for future directions in view of inclusion, access and achievement for children with special needs. We are also thankful for the support from international organizations for funding provisions on awareness of the reforms in the National Curriculum Framework, as well as training in the development of curriculum processes for specialist teachers.

While we will continue to do more work to help raise the standard in this specialist area, we are grateful to the teachers who have worked tirelessly under difficult situations, to make a contribution and indeed a difference in these lives in need of specialist attention. We are humbled by the assistance of overseas donors without whose assistance, our plans would not have materialized into what these children and their families enjoy today. The Education Ministry has continued to support this special area of need by providing annual budgetary allocations and specialist teacher training.

The emerging trend now is encouraging as persons with disabilities actively participate at local and national levels. The concept of inclusiveness in education is therefore neither a new idea nor an unwelcome one for us. We are not re-inventing the wheel but rather, it will help us re-visit the principles of life in our societies, and find ways to reclaim these and institutionalize them within the context of the current system of education.

To conclude, it is encouraging to see an emerging mindset about special education in Fiji that is positive and informed. There is definitely a growing awareness and advocacy in education circles about children with special needs. Fiji is thus ready to advance the concept of inclusive education and to take on board supporting measures. In advancing an inclusive education system which welcomes and educates all children regardless of their gender, abilities or disabilities, economic situation, language, race or religious beliefs, we in Fiji will strengthen our national networks so that we can develop and articulate our vision more clearly, and help each other to find the best way forward for Fiji.