**International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) Pacific**

**SUMMARY OF SCOPING STUDY OF CURRENT SERVICES, RESOURCES AND DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES FOR THE EDUCATION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND OR VISION IMPAIRED IN THE PACIFIC**

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# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose

A Scoping Study was commissioned by ICEVI Pacific to gain a more detailed understanding of current educational services, resources and opportunities available to people who are blind or vision impaired in the Pacific, along with priorities and hopes for the future. This Summary Report is a synthesis of key findings. Readers are encouraged to view the full report for a more detailed description of the current situation, including cases studies and more information about services, access barriers, priorities, and individual country profiles.

## Participants

The research was undertaken by Mereoni Daveta and Deborah Rhodes with thoughtful contributions from regional groups including the Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) and Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS) along with officials from Ministries of Education and leaders and staff of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) across the Pacific.

# OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

In recent years there has been positive progress in terms of Pacific regional and national policies and plans relating to inclusive education. There is greater awareness of government responsibilities for educating all children and increased interest in committing resources for accessible and inclusive education. Overall, there is great variety between Pacific countries in terms of accessible education services. In some, there are good services and experienced educators. In others, the chances of a child who is blind or vision impaired achieving educational milestones are very low.

Across the region, there are now greater opportunities for children who are blind or vision impaired to achieve their potential, alongside their sighted sisters and brothers, than before. As inclusive education policies are implemented, and with increased understanding of the specific elements required for students with sensory impairments to achieve academic goals, then these opportunities will increase. Inclusive education has economic and social benefits for all, through reduced dependence on other family members and increased participation in employment.

The Scoping Study found some positive signs of effort and resource-allocation toward implementation of inclusive approaches and practices in primary and secondary schools for students who are blind or vision impaired. In several countries, education systems provide some level of adaptive technology, Braille, orientation and mobility and inclusive teaching strategies. At the tertiary level, universities, particularly in Fiji, and some technical and vocational education programs and providers are providing inclusive and accessible services.

There is shared agreement among those involved in education for children who are blind or vision impaired that there is more work to be done at many levels, to build on efforts to date and make the most of available opportunities. There are highly experienced Pacific teachers and specialist service providers, existing networks, and some existing equipment, that can form the foundation for future collaboration and effort. Current services are generally located in major urban centres and not available in rural locations or outer islands.

Many inter-connected elements contribute to the likelihood that a child with a vision impairment will access school and succeed in achieving their potential. At a broad level, there are cultural, systemic and institutional factors which determine attitudes towards inclusive education and resource allocations. Leadership, policy decision-making, resource-allocations, open-ness to new ideas, cultural values and relationships/partnerships interact differently in each country context. These all affect levels of commitment, effort, expertise and resources for inclusive education. Very few of these issues are within the control of individual students or their families.

Education for children who are blind or vision impaired requires specific, and in some cases, quite specialised ‘inputs’ and resources which distinguish it from more generic aspects of inclusive education. This includes Braille equipment, computers with screen reading software and magnification devices. In addition, accessible format text books are essential with specialist services necessary for the production of large print, Braille, audio and electronic Word format reading materials. Independent mobility typically requires specialised expertise of an orientation and mobility instructor: such services are currently limited to a small number of Pacific countries, but there is scope for collaboration with others. Specialist inclusive teaching strategies are also important along with ensuring a positive, encouraging and welcoming environment from school leadership, teachers and class mates towards children who are blind or vision impaired.

## Conditions which support inclusion

In order to achieve improved educational inclusion for students who are blind or vision impaired, the following conditions were identified:

* A broad social, cultural and institutional context which supports inclusion, values education and incentivises educational achievement
* Committed leaders and officials in Ministries of Education, who are open to leading and driving change, learning, collaborating and supporting educational inclusion for people who are blind or vision impaired, consistent with regional commitments included in the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF)
* Supportive parents, families and communities who recognise all of their children will benefit from accessing education and the whole community will benefit from their participation in all aspects of social and economic life
* Principals, teachers and school communities who support inclusion (as a concept and practice), are skilled in the provision of education for children with sensory impairments, and have access to specialist resources for this cohort of students.
* Explicit policies and strategies, skilled teachers, particular technologies and supportive school communities, as well as ongoing efforts to provide resources and continuously support teachers and schools
* Confidence among parents that their children will be safe and welcomed at school.

Factors which influence access to education

The following factors were identified as influencing individual children’s access to education:

* **Totally blind versus vision impaired/low vision:** Children with low vision who have minimal access barriers such as the need for a hand-held magnifier are more likely to access education and for that education to be in a mainstream school. They are also more likely to remain at school for longer. Children who are totally blind are less likely to attend school, and more commonly educated in a primary-level specialist school.
* **Capital versus remote locations:** Most specialist schools, model inclusion schools and disability services operate in capital cities, limiting opportunities for children in rural locations or outer islands. Some children who are blind or vision impaired relocate to live with extended family to access education.
* **Overseas education:** In some cases, children who are totally blind are educated overseas in specialist settings such as Fiji School for the Blind, away from family supports. Some families also relocate to Australia or New Zealand.
* **Age of onset of vision impairment:** Globally, there are differences associated with accessing education for children who are born blind or vision impaired and children who acquire an eye condition at school. Students (and their parents) who have attended school prior to becoming vision impaired may expect to continue, based on previous experience of being included and having access to information. Those with no prior experience of inclusion tend to experience charitable (if any) contributions from others and form a view their participation in education and potential are limited.
* **School retention:** Even when students are able to access primary school, progression to secondary schools may be limited. Barriers to progression include community and parental attitudes, lack of school-based or education system commitment, expertise or support and challenges in accessing curriculum and other information and lack of transport. Anecdotally, special schools in the Pacific typically take approximately two years to teach each year level of curriculum. This affects transition into secondary school: children may be 17 years old when completing primary school curriculum.
* **Government verses charity responsibility for education:** In some Pacific countries, education ministries take responsibility for provision of education for this group of students and in others, non-government organisations provide services in the absence of government services. In some Pacific Islands there is a long history of charity-based segregated schooling and often unqualified teachers.
* **Early identification and diagnosis:** Access to health services for early identification, diagnosis and treatment is limited in most Pacific countries.

# PRIORITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*“After seven years of advocacy in relation to inclusive education, there are now signs of formal commitment by senior Pacific Education officials at regional level, and while this needs to filter down to national levels, it is a positive shift.” CEO of Pacific Disability Forum*

The Scoping Study collated priorities from interviewees. A summary is provided below:

## Government policies and leadership

1. Develop/promote Inclusive Education Policies and associated implementation plans with explicit reference to the inclusion of students who are blind or vision impaired.
2. Appoint senior Education Officers with an inclusive education focus and dedicated inclusive education units within Ministries of Education, who are able to influence inclusion at all levels of education.
3. Ensure a dedicated budget within the education portfolio for necessary personnel, equipment and services.
4. Establish and maintain referral systems to health and rehabilitation services.

## Disability identification, data collection, planning and enrolment

1. Conduct annual vision screening in all schools.
2. Record children who are blind or vision impaired in Education Management Information Systems.
3. Develop Individual Education Plans for each student who is blind or vision impaired and use/review/update them to support and monitor inclusion.
4. Encourage enrolment in local neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate classes with relevant support.
5. Encourage enrolment in specialist schools where this is most suitable for the child, monitoring progress and supporting transition into mainstream school when ready.
6. Identify any out of school children and support their access to school.

## Assistive devices and accessible information, including in Braille

1. Source and provide training in use of specialist assistive equipment to ensure students to have independent reading and writing tools.
2. Establish partnerships with specialist services, peak bodies and skilled volunteers to support access to assistive devices and training in this equipment.
3. Maintain/develop accessible format production services and provide timely access to Braille, large print, audio and electronic Word format for all learning materials.
4. Develop partnerships across the Pacific to support the production and supply of accessible reading materials.
5. Promote the Marrakesh Treaty as a means of improved access to books for people who are blind or vision impaired. [www.wipo.int/marrakesh\_treaty/en/](http://www.wipo.int/marrakesh_treaty/en/).
6. Provide Braille training as a literacy tool for children who are blind or vision impaired and where relevant, establish partnerships with specialist services, peak bodies and skilled volunteers to support training and local production of Braille books.

## Orientation and mobility

1. Provide orientation and mobility services and access to white canes to support independent mobility, where safe and appropriate. Establish partnerships with specialist services, peak bodies and skilled volunteers to build Pacific capacity to deliver this training.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PARTNERS

The following suggestions are made for organisations partnering with Pacific services:

* Engage with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to jointly determine priorities/partnership opportunities with people who are blind or vision impaired.
* Support Pacific Ministries of Education as they seek to build on existing services for education of children who are blind or vision impaired, consistent with PACREF.
* Recognise that many people have already dedicated effort in the provision of education services for students who are blind or vision impaired and have contributed to existing knowledge, skills and equipment.
* Identify and support opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing. For example, a Pacific resource hub could be established to provide Braille production, repair of Perkins Braillers, adaptive technology training, orientation and mobility training and other specialist services across the Pacific.
* Draw upon existing technical expertise within networks such as ICEVI and SPEVI to support programming across the Pacific and promote knowledge-sharing opportunities for established services in the Pacific such as those in Fiji and Kiribati.

The full Scoping Study and this Summary can be found at [www.icevi.org/pacific](http://www.icevi.org/pacific).