

International Journal of Research in Special Education

E-ISSN: 2710-3870
P-ISSN: 2710-3862
Impact Factor (RJIF): 6.69
IJRSE 2025; 5(2): 65-74
© 2025 IJRSE
[Journal's Website](#)
Received: 05-07-2025
Accepted: 07-08-2025

Lincoln Hlatywayo
PhD, Professor, Inclusive
Education Specialist:
Department of Inclusive
Education, School of Education,
National University of Vanuatu,
Vanuatu

Dr. Sophie Hlatywayo
Lecturer, PhD: Department of
Educational Studies, Faculty of
Education, Zimbabwe Open
University, Zimbabwe

Voices from the classroom: Exploring the perspectives and experiences of practising teachers on inclusive education in Vanuatu

Lincoln Hlatywayo and Sophie Hlatywayo

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27103862.2025.v5.i2b.135>

Abstract

This paper explores the perspectives and lived experiences of practising teachers on the implementation of inclusive education in Vanuatu, a small island developing state with a growing commitment to equity and educational access. Despite ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008 and adopting the Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030, significant gaps remain between inclusive education policy and school-level practice. Barriers include insufficient teacher preparation, social stigma, inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of coordinated support systems. Using a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design, this study examines how six practising teachers interpret and apply inclusive education principles in their classrooms. Participants were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary) at the National University of Vanuatu and were purposefully selected for their hands-on experience working with learners with disabilities in mainstream school settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns, meanings, and challenges associated with implementing inclusive education. The findings reveal that while teachers support the philosophy of inclusion and are committed to making education accessible to all learners, they often operate in under-resourced environments with minimal institutional support. Participants relied heavily on improvisation, peer support, and personal initiative to adapt teaching strategies. However, without adequate training, assistive tools, and school-community collaboration, sustainable inclusion remains difficult to achieve. This study highlights the critical importance of teachers' voices in informing inclusive education policy and practice. It contributes to broader debates on inclusive education in small island developing states and offers policy-relevant insights for strengthening teacher training, disability awareness, inter-sectoral collaboration, and school-level implementation. The findings call for a shift from policy rhetoric to practice that is contextually grounded and supported by systems that value and equip teachers as agents of inclusive change.

Keywords: Inclusive education, teacher perspectives, disability inclusion, inclusive teacher, Vanuatu inclusive education and training policy

Introduction

Inclusive education is recognized worldwide as a basic human right and a powerful way to ensure that all learners receive equitable, high-quality education (UNESCO, 2020; WHO & World Bank, 2011) [22, 24]. Rooted in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), inclusive education emphasizes the importance of fully integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream schools. This integration is supported by necessary accommodations, trained staff, and accessible environments (United Nations, 2006) [23]. In the Pacific region, many countries are increasingly adopting inclusive education as part of their commitment to sustainable development, although they encounter significant challenges due to geography, limited resources, and cultural attitudes towards disability (Sharma *et al.*, 2018; Sprunt & Florian, 2020) [18, 21]. Vanuatu, in particular, has made impressive progress in aligning its legal and policy frameworks with global standards for inclusive education. The government's ratification of the CRPD in 2008, along with the Education Act No. 9 of 2014, the National Disability Inclusive Development Policy (2018-2025), and the recently introduced Inclusive Education and Training Policy (2025-2030), demonstrates a strong dedication to equity and access. However, putting these policies into action remains a significant hurdle. The inclusive education system in the country has developed without a solid foundation in special education infrastructure,

Corresponding Author:
Lincoln Hlatywayo
PhD, Professor, Inclusive
Education Specialist:
Department of Inclusive
Education, School of Education,
National University of Vanuatu,
Vanuatu

leading to inconsistent implementation, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of coordinated support services (Government of Vanuatu, 2024; Hlatywayo *et al.*, 2025)^[10, 11]. In the face of these challenges, the role of practising teachers is crucial in shaping the future of inclusive education. Their experiences in the classroom, along with their attitudes and adaptive strategies, provide a unique perspective on what truly works and what doesn't when it comes to implementing inclusive practices. This study delves into the viewpoints and real-life experiences of practising teachers in Vanuatu, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of how national policy plays out in the real world and to guide tailored approaches to inclusive education.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper aims to shed light on how inclusive education is understood and experienced by teachers in Vanuatu. By gathering insights from those on the front lines, the study hopes to support national initiatives for creating more effective, culturally appropriate, and sustainable inclusive education systems. The specific goals are to:

1. Investigate teachers' conceptual views of inclusive education in the context of Vanuatu.
2. Capture the real-life experiences of teachers working with students with disabilities in mainstream schools.
3. Identify the systemic and school-level obstacles that make it difficult to implement inclusive education effectively.
4. Develop tailored recommendations to enhance inclusive education policies and practices.

Literature Review

Inclusive Education: Global Foundations and the Vanuatu Experience

Inclusive education is recognized worldwide as a fundamental human right and a vital pathway to ensuring that everyone has access to quality education. Rooted in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), it emphasizes the importance of fully integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream schools by providing necessary accommodations, trained staff, and accessible environments (United Nations, 2006)^[23]. Global initiatives like UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report highlight that inclusive education is crucial for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which champions inclusive and equitable quality education for everyone (UNESCO, 2020)^[22]. This worldwide transition from segregated special education to inclusive systems requires not just structural changes but also a shift in how teachers think, the culture within schools, and how communities view education. Experts argue that inclusion goes beyond simply placing students in regular classrooms; it involves rethinking the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment practices to truly embrace diversity (Florian, 2019; Slee, 2018; Articles *et al.*, 2011)^[5, 20, 2]. In line with these global commitments, Vanuatu has made significant strides in promoting inclusive education. After ratifying the CRPD in 2008, the government implemented important frameworks, including the Education Act No. 9 of 2014, the National Disability Inclusive Development Policy (2018-2025), and the Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030. These policies aim to foster equity, enforce inclusive practices, and

introduce strategic initiatives like Inclusive Education Resource Centres (IERCs), specialized teacher training in communication, and Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Even with the progress IN PLACE, putting these ideas into practice is still a challenge. There are some structural hurdles that need to be overcome, like not having enough teachers, a shortage of learning materials that cater to different needs, poor coordination between ministries, and a heavy dependence on donor-funded initiatives like VESP. On top of that, the current strategies aren't quite hitting the mark when it comes to supporting learners with severe and multiple disabilities. This is mainly because there is a lack of detailed operational plans at the school level and effective referral systems (Hlatywayo *et al.*, 2025)^[11].

The Role of Teacher Preparation, Perspectives, and Lived Experience

Teachers are often seen as the backbone of effective inclusive education (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Forlin & Lian, 2022)^[6, 8]. Their attitudes, skills, and decisions made in the classroom play a crucial role in how well learners with disabilities are welcomed, supported, and able to flourish in mainstream educational environments. This highlights the importance of understanding the real experiences of teachers, especially those in under-resourced areas, to pinpoint what helps or hinders inclusive practices (Sharma *et al.*, 2017; Florian, 2019)^[5]. In Vanuatu, the preparation of teachers for inclusive education is still quite inconsistent and often lacks depth. Traditionally, institutions like the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (now the School of Education) haven't provided specialized training in inclusive or special needs education. Instead, pre-service training has mainly focused on general teaching methods, with little attention given to strategies that include students with disabilities (MoET, 2024)^[14]. Although recent changes, like the launch of the Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary), are starting to fill this gap, access to these programs is still limited, leaving many teachers entering classrooms without sufficient training in inclusive practices (Hlatywayo *et al.*, 2025)^[11]. Importantly, recent studies across Small Pacific Island Countries (SPICs) highlight the crucial role teachers play not just as policy implementers but as active participants in shaping inclusive education cultures within their schools and communities. In a qualitative study on inclusive education in North Pentecost, Mahuri, Dorovolomo, and Mwarakurmes (2023)^[12] discovered that sociocultural beliefs about disability and achievement greatly influenced how teachers interacted with students they viewed as 'different.' Teachers often found themselves navigating the tension between professional commitment and prevailing community attitudes that devalued learners with disabilities.

In Fiji, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu, a regional study conducted by Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai (2016)^[17, 19] found that inclusive education often faces significant challenges due to insufficient teacher training, a lack of resources, and vague expectations regarding roles. Teachers in these regions expressed their uncertainty about what inclusion truly entails in practice, and many felt unprepared to meet the diverse learning needs of their students without ongoing support. The Pacific Regional Inclusive Education Review (2022)^[15] highlights that, without robust systems in place, the success of inclusion in the Pacific often hinges on the "individual acts of commitment" from teachers, school leaders, and families. It

points out a critical shortfall in teacher education programs, where inclusive education is either overlooked or treated as a minor topic. The review advocates for making inclusive education a fundamental part of all teacher training programs, emphasizing the importance of practical strategies and cultural awareness. Additionally, it underscores the necessity for mentoring programs and professional learning communities, where teachers can exchange experiences and support one another.

A study conducted in the Cook Islands by Page *et al.* (2019) ^[16] revealed some interesting insights. While teachers showed a strong philosophical commitment to inclusive education, many felt unsure and unprepared to actually implement it in their classrooms. They pointed to a few significant hurdles: the lack of assistive technologies, insufficient classroom aides, and limited exposure to training on disability awareness. This gap between what they believe and what they can do is also seen in Vanuatu, where teachers often depend on their instincts and trial-and-error methods because they lack structured support. Miles, Lene, and Merumeru (2014) ^[13] have suggested that creating teacher networking platforms across the Pacific could be a game-changer. They believe that collaboration between schools and countries can help alleviate the feelings of isolation that many educators experience. These networks can foster knowledge sharing, peer mentoring, and collaborative problem-solving approaches that have shown potential in enhancing resilience and innovation in inclusive practices. Moreover, researchers emphasize that teacher training should be contextually and culturally relevant. As Armstrong, Johansson-Fua, and Armstrong (2021) ^[11] point out, inclusive education in the Pacific needs to be viewed through the lens of local cultures, values, and relational teaching methods. Teachers are not just professionals; they are integral members of their communities, deeply connected to local belief systems. Therefore, for inclusion to be genuinely accepted and sustained, it must resonate with local perspectives on disability, family, and child development.

Based on these findings, it's clear that while teachers in Vanuatu and other Small Pacific Island Countries (SPICs) generally support the idea of inclusive education, they encounter significant practical and cultural hurdles when it comes to making it a reality. Without a focused effort to provide high-quality, context-aware teacher training and without the backing of supportive systems and collaborative networks these educators often find themselves working in isolation, within frameworks that aren't really set up to foster inclusive teaching. Their experiences highlight the pressing need for reforms that recognize teachers as empowered contributors to the policies, design, and implementation of inclusive education.

Barriers to Inclusive Education in Vanuatu

Despite Vanuatu having solid legal and policy frameworks that support inclusive education, students with disabilities still encounter ongoing challenges that prevent them from fully engaging in mainstream schools. National strategies like the Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030 and the National Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2018-2025 show a clear commitment to inclusive practices, but the reality is that implementation is inconsistent, and many structural and systemic issues remain (Government of Vanuatu, 2018; MoET, 2024) ^[9, 14]. At the school level, a lot

of facilities are still not physically accessible for students with disabilities.

The Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030 recognizes the pressing need to improve school infrastructure and promote universal design, yet progress is slow, particularly in rural and outer island schools. This same policy points out that the absence of assistive technologies and accessible learning materials significantly hampers students' participation and academic success. Cultural beliefs and stigma also play a major role in hindering school attendance and inclusion. Research conducted in Vanuatu by Mahuri, Dorovolomo, and Mwarakurmes (2023) ^[12] revealed that negative attitudes towards disability in certain communities can discourage families from enrolling their children with disabilities in school or lead to lowered expectations for their academic achievements. The National Disability Inclusive Development Policy (2018-2025) similarly highlights that negative community perceptions and a lack of awareness about disability rights are key obstacles to achieving true inclusion.

At a systemic level, the lack of consistent and detailed data on learners with disabilities really hampers effective planning and resource allocation. The Inclusive Education and Training Policy points out that the Vanuatu Education Management Information System (VEMIS) currently falls short in providing accurate data on these learners, which ultimately weakens monitoring and accountability efforts. Moreover, the Policy on Inclusive Education and Training for 2025-2030 highlights the absence of individualized assessment tools and referral pathways, emphasizing the need to develop these mechanisms for more personalized interventions. It also mentions that the limited collaboration between education, health, and social services acts as a barrier to integrated service delivery, especially for children who require high levels of support. Funding issues pose a significant challenge as well. The Inclusive Education and Training Policy acknowledges that many schools struggle to implement inclusive practices due to insufficient dedicated funding. Most initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive education rely heavily on external donor support, like the Vanuatu Education Support Program (VESP), which raises concerns about their long-term sustainability (MoET, 2024) ^[14].

Methodology

This study took a qualitative approach, using a phenomenological design to delve into the experiences and viewpoints of practicing teachers regarding inclusive education in Vanuatu. We chose phenomenology because it effectively captures the personal meanings that individuals attach to their daily professional lives, especially in environments where structural and cultural factors play a significant role (Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[4]. We gathered data through semi-structured interviews with six practicing teachers who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary) program at the National University of Vanuatu. These participants were carefully selected based on their experience teaching students with disabilities in mainstream schools, ensuring we gained deep insights from those actively involved in inclusive practices. The interviews featured open-ended questions that explored the teachers' views on inclusive education, their classroom experiences, the systemic and community challenges they

face, and their ideas for enhancing inclusive practices. We analyzed the data thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) ^[3] six-phase model of thematic analysis. We reviewed the transcripts multiple times to identify patterns, codes, and key themes that reflected both shared meanings and unique experiences among the participants. We obtained ethical approval through the appropriate institutional channels, and to protect confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms.

Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out following the established ethical standards for qualitative research that involves human participants. Before we began collecting data, we made sure to get informed consent from all participants. They were assured that their participation was completely voluntary, their responses would be kept confidential, and they could withdraw at any time without facing any consequences. To protect their identities, we used pseudonyms, and we didn't disclose any personally identifiable information in our findings. The focus was on adult participants who are practicing teachers, and there were no anticipated psychological or physical risks involved. We strictly followed ethical protocols and data handling procedures in line with institutional guidelines, emphasizing respect, beneficence, and justice.

Findings

Description of participants

The study involved six practicing teachers, a mix of both male and female educators, each bringing their unique teaching backgrounds and experiences to the table. These participants were part of the Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary) program at the National University of Vanuatu and were specifically chosen for their hands-on experience with learners who have disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Among them, three were female and three were male. Their professional backgrounds covered early childhood care and education (ECCE), as well as primary and secondary education, with teaching experience ranging from just over two years to more than 17 years. Notably, one participant had also taken on a leadership role as a principal for five years. In terms of academic qualifications, the group held a variety of credentials, including completion of Year 12 or 13, certificates in education support, and diplomas in primary or secondary teaching. Some had even pursued off-campus or regional training, with studies completed in Papua New Guinea and through programs at the Australian Pacific Technical College. All participants had direct experience teaching learners with disabilities, although the types and levels of impairments they encountered varied. Some primarily worked with students facing learning difficulties or speech and communication challenges, while others had broader experience supporting children with sensory or intellectual disabilities. Their teaching environments ranged from urban and peri-urban schools to more remote or rural island communities, each presenting its own set of challenges and strategies for implementing inclusive practices.

Theme 1: Understanding Inclusive Education - Evolving Awareness and Conceptual Shifts: The first major theme that came up from the data is how practicing teachers

perceive and understand inclusive education. Participants showed a growing recognition of inclusive education as a rights-based, learner-centered approach. However, many noted that their understanding really started to deepen only after they began formal studies in inclusive teaching. For some, their previous exposure to inclusive education was either limited or shaped by informal or personal views. Initially, a few saw inclusive education as merely "accommodating all students," without fully grasping the legal frameworks or the need for differentiated strategies.

"Before enrolling in this programme, I knew about inclusive education but didn't fully understand how to apply it in the classroom. I was teaching children with disabilities, but I wasn't sure whether I was doing the right thing." (P1)

Others shared how their earlier understanding was shaped by school culture or community norms, often associating disability with behavioural challenges or spiritual causes.

"I used to think when a child doesn't follow instructions or stays quiet all the time, maybe they're just shy or lazy. I didn't know they could have autism or another condition." (P2)

Formal study, particularly within the Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary) program, was reported to have transformed participants' understanding of inclusion, anchoring it not just in compassion, but in pedagogical responsibility and human rights.

"The training I'm getting now is giving me the tools to understand inclusive education as a right. It's not just about being kind to a child with a disability it's about creating a system that works for all." (P3)

Some participants also highlighted a shift from seeing inclusive education as an "extra task" to viewing it as a core part of their professional identity.

"Before, I used to think inclusion was for special schools. Now I see that it's my job as a classroom teacher to include every learner, not just the easy ones." (P5)

The findings indicate that although many participants started with some misconceptions or only a partial grasp of inclusive education, engaging in structured academic activities sparked significant changes in their understanding. These changes transformed their perspectives on their roles as educators and the very purpose of education, shifting from views based on charity or moral obligation to a more professional and systemic dedication to equity.

Theme 2: Classroom Experiences and Practical Strategies-Navigating Inclusion with Limited Resources

A key theme that emerged from all the interviews was the struggle to implement inclusive education in classrooms that lack resources. Participants shared their daily experiences as inclusive educators, which often involved a lot of improvisation, deep personal commitment, and a noticeable absence of systemic support. Many teachers recounted their experiences working with students who had speech

difficulties, comprehension challenges, and other unrecognized or undiagnosed disabilities. These hurdles were frequently navigated without any formal guidance or specialized assistance.

"In my class, I have a boy who doesn't speak clearly and has trouble writing. At first, I didn't know how to help him. I used to ignore the situation. Now I try to use visuals and repeat instructions. Sometimes I sit next to him to guide him." (P1)

Teachers frequently had to rely on trial-and-error approaches, peer learning, or insights from their ongoing studies to devise strategies that met the needs of their learners.

"I've taught children who couldn't follow instructions or talk with others. I used to think they were just shy or difficult. Now I understand they may have special needs. I try group work and simple language to include them." (P2)

Participants expressed concern about the absence of trained support staff and adapted materials. Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience and adaptability, such as simplifying tasks, providing extra time, or rearranging the classroom environment.

"I learned to give extra time or sit learners with hearing problems near the board. But I still don't have training in sign language or any materials. I just try what I can." (P4)

In secondary schools, the issue was compounded by large class sizes and rigid curriculum demands, making it difficult for teachers to individualise instruction. Nonetheless, teachers attempted to modify their teaching styles by integrating examples, visuals, or more accessible language.

"I teach large classes and the curriculum is exam-focused. But I try to simplify language or give extra support to those who struggle. It's hard when you don't have special resources or enough time." (P5)

Interestingly, one participant with a leadership background noted that classroom-level challenges are often symptoms of systemic gaps, such as inadequate infrastructure or referral services.

"As a principal, I saw many students with physical disabilities struggle just to enter classrooms or use toilets. We tried to help, but the school wasn't built for them. Now I see it's not the student who needs fixing, it's the system." (P6)

Across all accounts, teachers demonstrated a strong sense of agency but acknowledged the emotional and professional toll of working without adequate institutional support. Their narratives reflect both creativity and constraint, revealing a deep commitment to inclusion despite systemic limitations.

Theme 3: Engaging Parents and Communities between Support and Stigma: One of the standout themes from the stories shared by participants was the intricate and often

conflicting dynamics between parents, community members, and the push for inclusive education. Teachers pointed out that while some families were incredibly supportive, others either struggled to acknowledge disabilities or completely distanced themselves from the school setting. Many participants noted that cultural beliefs and the social stigma surrounding disability often created hurdles for parent involvement. In numerous instances, parents found it difficult to come to terms with their child's condition or were anxious about how they might be perceived by others in the community.

"Most parents are not aware of what inclusive education means. Some don't even accept that their child has a disability. They say things like 'he's just lazy' or 'she'll grow out of it.' When you try to talk to them, they feel offended." (P1)

Others shared that parents sometimes withdrew their children from school after discussions about support needs, fearing discrimination or not seeing the value of continued education.

"I've had cases where parents take their children out of school after we talk about their learning difficulties. They think we are blaming them or saying their child can't learn." (P2)

Participants noted that community stigma and lack of disability awareness often left teachers alone in advocating for learners' inclusion. This lack of shared responsibility made it difficult to develop consistent support strategies.

"Some families want the best for their child, but others don't see the point of sending them to school. They say, 'Why waste time if the child can't learn?'" (P3)

Despite these challenges, teachers made efforts to build trust and collaboration with families, often going beyond their formal roles to conduct home visits, hold one-on-one meetings, or use informal channels to raise awareness.

"In some cases, I've had to visit homes just to encourage parents to keep sending the child to school. Many don't come to meetings because they feel ashamed." (P4)

One participant from a leadership background underscored that teacher-parent partnerships must be built over time, with mutual respect and cultural sensitivity.

"Parents are not against education. But many feel hopeless, or they've never seen someone with a disability succeed. We have to build trust slowly, and also change how the community sees disability." (P6)

While the teachers expressed empathy for parents' circumstances, they also called for systematic community education and stronger support from local leaders, including chiefs and church groups, to shift societal attitudes and promote a culture of inclusion.

Theme 4: Support Systems and School Leadership Working in Isolation: Participants unanimously acknowledged that their efforts to implement inclusive

education were often undertaken with minimal institutional support. While inclusive education policies existed at the national level, many reported that practical, school-level structures to assist teachers such as resource personnel, specialists, or accessible materials were largely absent.

"At my school, we don't really have any support structures. There are no teacher aides, no special materials, nothing. We are expected to teach inclusively, but no one checks if we have what we need." (P1)

Teachers noted that when inclusive practices did occur, they were largely driven by individual initiative rather than systemic support. Some described learning from other teachers informally, but in the absence of designated mentors or inclusive education coordinators, such collaboration was inconsistent.

"I ask older teachers for advice or borrow ideas, but most of the time, I feel like I'm doing trial and error. There's no one to say 'this is the correct way' or 'here is a tool you can use.'" (P2)

In schools where leaders were supportive in principle, teachers expressed appreciation but noted that verbal encouragement rarely translated into concrete assistance, such as adjusting timetables or allocating resources.

"The school leadership tries to support us, but there are no funds or trained personnel. I once asked for extra time with a learner, and was told there's no timetable allowance. So, we just squeeze things in." (P3)

Others pointed to a broader issue lack of implementation guidance from the Ministry of Education and limited coordination with health or social service providers.

"We don't have specialists visiting schools. No speech therapist, no counsellor. Sometimes churches or NGOs do workshops, but they come once and disappear. There's no system." (P4)

The sense of professional isolation was especially acute among teachers in rural areas. Without support networks or ongoing training, they felt unsure whether their efforts aligned with national policy or best practice.

"Sometimes I try strategies I learned in this degree, but I don't know if I'm doing it right. There's no feedback, no one to check. We need someone to guide us." (P5)

A participant who had previously served as a school principal offered a broader reflection on the systemic nature of the problem, noting that without institutional frameworks, inclusive education is reduced to ad hoc solutions.

"Our support systems are reactive. We wait for a problem, then scramble to fix it. That's not inclusion. We need policy, funding, and community involvement to make this sustainable." (P6)

Overall, the findings show that while individual teachers are making commendable efforts, they are doing so in structurally unsupportive environments. This highlights the

urgent need for formalised, well-resourced school and community-based support systems, clear referral pathways, and inclusive leadership that goes beyond policy rhetoric to action

Theme 5: Teachers' Recommendations for Strengthening Inclusive Education Grounded Solutions from the Frontline

The final theme captures the teachers' own recommendations for improving inclusive education in Vanuatu. Drawing from their lived experiences, participants offered grounded, practical suggestions across five key domains: teacher training, policy implementation, resourcing, community engagement, and school-level leadership.

1. Expand and Integrate Inclusive Teacher Training

Participants strongly advocated for inclusive education to be integrated into all pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. Several expressed that only through their current studies had they come to understand inclusive education as both a right and a pedagogical obligation.

"We need more training for all teachers, not just those studying inclusive education. Every teacher should know how to include every learner, especially in rural schools." (P1)

"Inclusive education should not be an optional topic. It must be in every teacher training college course." (P2)

2. Strengthen School and Community Awareness

Many teachers recommended expanding awareness-raising efforts, targeting not only educators but also families, chiefs, church leaders, and the broader community. They believed cultural change must accompany technical reform.

"We must teach communities that children with disabilities have the same rights. If parents and leaders don't believe in inclusion, it will never work." (P3)

"Stigma is a real problem. We need village-level sessions to explain what inclusive education is and why it matters." (P5)

3. Provide Resources and Assistive Tools

Participants noted that the lack of teaching aids, visual supports, and learning adaptations made inclusion difficult to implement. They called for an increase in funding, materials, and inclusive infrastructure.

"Without tools, we cannot apply what we learn. We need visual aids, braille, even simple things like large print charts." (P1)

"There should be money in every school for inclusive materials, not just in pilot programs or donor schools." (P4)

4. Improve Support Systems and Referral Mechanisms

Teachers emphasised the need for trained aides, access to specialists, and clear referral pathways for learners requiring additional assessments or interventions.

"Schools should have access to speech therapists or someone we can ask when we don't know how to help a learner." (P6)

"We need a system not just individual efforts. Referral forms, support centres, and follow-ups must be part of the school." (P2)

5. Promote Leadership and Whole-School Commitment

Several participants argued that inclusive education should be part of whole-school planning and leadership strategies, not left to individual teachers.

"Inclusion should be in the school's goals and monitored by the headteacher. Everyone should be involved, not just one or two teachers." (P5)

"We need school-wide plans and discussions about inclusion. It must be part of staff meetings, not just left for special occasions." (P3)

Summary of Findings

Across all five themes, teachers expressed a deep commitment to inclusion, but consistently highlighted the disconnect between policy intent and classroom reality. They navigated inclusion with personal creativity, but often in isolation and without structured support. Their voices clearly articulated the need for systemic reform, grounded in cultural understanding, professional development, and collaborative implementation.

Discussion

This study delves into the viewpoints and real-life experiences of teachers in Vanuatu who are putting inclusive education into practice. The results reveal a consistent gap between the commitment to inclusive education as a national policy and the actual day-to-day classroom experiences, especially in settings that are under-resourced and culturally diverse. These findings make a significant contribution to the ongoing conversation about inclusive education in small island developing states (SIDS), where the pursuit of educational equity faces challenges like systemic limitations, geographic isolation, and deeply ingrained sociocultural traditions.

1. Evolving Understandings of Inclusive Education

One of the main takeaways is how teachers' views on inclusive education are changing, which reflects what we see in global research about the powerful impact of focused teacher training (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Forlin, 2010) [6, 10]. Participants shared that their initial ideas about inclusion were often unclear or based on deficits, shaped by community attitudes or a lack of proper training. However, as they engaged in formal academic studies, many started to recognize inclusive education as more than just a kind gesture; they began to see it as a fundamental right that educators are obligated to uphold (UNESCO, 2020; Slee, 2018) [22, 20]. This aligns with the findings of Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai (2016) [17, 19], which indicate that without adequate preparation, teachers tend to adopt misconceptions about disabilities and find it challenging to apply inclusive practices. In Vanuatu, the new Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching seems to be a promising approach to changing these perspectives. Still, as this study highlights, access to such programs is limited, and there's a significant lack of systemic support.

2. Inclusion in Practice: Improvisation in Resource-Poor Contexts

Inclusion in Practice: Improvisation in Resource-Poor Contexts The experiences shared by participants highlight the incredible resilience and creativity of teachers working in challenging environments. Their use of visual aids, straightforward language, peer learning, and flexible seating arrangements showcases the global best practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), even if these methods are applied informally and without sufficient support (WHO & World Bank, 2011) [24]. These insights align with research from other Small Island Developing States (SIDS), like the Cook Islands and Samoa, where inclusion often hinges on "individual acts of commitment" rather than a solid systemic framework (Page *et al.*, 2019; Pacific Regional Inclusive Education Review, 2022) [16, 15]. Crucially, the data supports Sharma *et al.* (2018) [18] assertion that inclusive education systems in the Pacific need to be adapted to the material and cultural realities faced by teachers. While Vanuatu has embraced international policies like the CRPD and SDG 4, the lack of contextualized implementation strategies has left many educators to navigate inclusion through improvisation instead of following policy-driven guidance.

3. Families and Communities: Supportive Intent vs Cultural Barriers

The interactions between participants, parents, and communities reveal a complex tension between support and stigma. While some families are all in when it comes to inclusive education, others shy away from getting involved in schools due to cultural beliefs, misinformation, or the internalized stigma that often surrounds disability. This aligns with the findings of Mahuri *et al.* (2023), who noted that teachers in North Pentecost frequently faced sociocultural narratives linking disability to ancestral punishment or spiritual reasons. The impact of community attitudes on inclusion outcomes is well-documented in both global and regional studies (Artiles *et al.*, 2011; Armstrong *et al.*, 2021) [2, 1]. In the Pacific context, it's clear that inclusive education should be viewed not just as a school-based reform but as a transformation that involves the entire community. Teachers in this study rightly emphasized the need for culturally relevant awareness campaigns and strategies to build partnerships that connect schools and families..

4. Lack of Institutional and Systemic Support

One of the biggest issues highlighted by the findings is the widespread feeling of professional isolation among teachers. Many voiced their frustration over the absence of school-based support systems, coordination between ministries, and proper referral mechanisms for students with complex needs. These experiences echo what the Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030 points out as a significant gap in implementation: even though we have policy frameworks in place, the necessary conditions like resources, leadership, and accountability are still lacking (MoET, 2024) [14]. This aligns with the warnings from Sharma *et al.* (2016) [17, 19] and Miles *et al.* (2014), which emphasize that inclusive education can't just depend on goodwill. Without structured systems such as resource centers, itinerant support teams, and inclusive school

leadership, teachers are left to tackle inclusion on their own, which goes against the very principles of systemic equity.

5. Teachers as Policy Informants and Change Agents

One of the key takeaways from this study is its strong affirmation of teachers as both advocates and evaluators of inclusive education reform. The participants shared not only their struggles but also offered practical, policy-oriented solutions based on their real-life experiences. These suggestions included calls for enhanced teacher training, strategies for engaging the community inclusively, effective school leadership, and national resource frameworks. These insights bolster the argument for involving teachers in the policy-making process, as highlighted by Sprunt and Florian (2020)^[21], and push back against top-down approaches that overlook the realities of the classroom. As those who implement policies on the ground, teachers have the essential contextual knowledge to help close the “policy-practice divide,” especially in culturally diverse and resource-challenged environments like Vanuatu.

Conclusion

To wrap things up, this study highlights that while inclusive education is becoming a hot topic in national policy discussions, its actual implementation in Vanuatu is still quite patchy, lacking resources, and heavily reliant on the initiative of individual teachers. The results point to a pressing need for reforms that are responsive to the local context, recognizing teachers as vital players in shaping both policy and practice, backed by strong systems and culturally relevant engagement strategies. In small island settings like Vanuatu, we can't just adopt global models of inclusive education as they are; instead, we need to rethink them through the lens of local realities, guided by the insights of those who are closest to the learners. This study shows that teachers aren't merely recipients of policy; they are the builders of inclusive futures.

Overall Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed at key stakeholders involved in the planning, implementation, and support of inclusive education in Vanuatu. They are grounded in the lived experiences of practising teachers and supported by national policy frameworks and regional research. These recommendations aim to improve inclusivity at the levels of policy, training, school practice, and community engagement.

1. Strengthen Inclusive Teacher Education and Professional Development

Target audience: National University of Vanuatu, Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE, now the School of Education), MoET, development partners

- Integrate inclusive education as a core, compulsory module in all pre-service teacher training programmes.
- Expand the Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary) programme to regional campuses and rural areas, including online or blended delivery options.
- Provide regular in-service training and school-based mentoring to upgrade teacher capacity in differentiated instruction, classroom adaptation, and universal design for learning (UDL).

2. Institutionalise Inclusive Practices at the School Level

Target audience: School principals, school boards, MoET provincial education offices

- Develop and implement whole-school inclusive education plans, ensuring shared accountability among all teaching staff.
- Appoint and support inclusive education focal teachers in each school to coordinate learner support and promote inclusive culture.
- Include IEP development time and collaborative planning sessions in official school timetables.

3. Improve Systemic Support and Cross-Sector Collaboration: Target audience: MoET, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, disability support agencies

- Establish a national referral and case management system for learners with disabilities, including early screening, assessment, and follow-up services.
- Strengthen the Vanuatu Education Management Information System (VEMIS) to collect and analyse disaggregated data on learners with disabilities.
- Recruit and deploy multi-disciplinary specialists (e.g., speech therapists, inclusive education officers, psychologists) to support schools, especially in rural areas.

4. Increase Resourcing and Accessibility

Target audience: MoET Finance and Infrastructure Divisions, Ministry of Finance, school management committees, donors

- Create a dedicated funding line for inclusive education in the national education budget and school grants system.
- Enforce universal design standards in all school construction and renovation projects to ensure physical accessibility.
- Prioritise the procurement and distribution of assistive devices and adapted teaching materials to all schools.

5. Promote Disability Awareness and Community Engagement

Target audience: MoET Communication and Community Outreach Units, church leaders, chiefs, civil society organisations

- Roll out community-level disability awareness campaigns, using culturally appropriate messaging and local languages.
- Develop and distribute parent-friendly information materials on disability rights, inclusive education, and school responsibilities.
- Encourage school-community partnerships to support learners with disabilities through joint activities and dialogue.

6. Position Teachers as Policy Stakeholders

Target audience: MoET Policy Division, teacher unions, professional associations

- Institutionalise teacher consultation mechanisms in policy development, curriculum reviews, and implementation planning for inclusive education.
- Establish national teacher forums or working groups on inclusive education, enabling practitioners to share insights and inform decision-making.

7. Cross-Cutting Responsibility

All stakeholders, including government ministries, school leadership, teacher education providers, communities, and development partners, must work collaboratively to ensure that inclusive education becomes a shared responsibility, not an isolated teacher burden.

Limitations of the Study

This study sheds light on the implementation of inclusive education in Vanuatu through the eyes of practising teachers, but there are a few limitations worth mentioning:

Small and Purposeful sample size: We focused on just six carefully chosen practising teachers who are part of a Bachelor of Education in Inclusive Teaching (Primary) programme. While their insights are incredibly rich and contextually relevant, the small number of participants means we can't easily generalize these findings to all teachers in Vanuatu or even the broader Pacific region.

Geographical scope The participants were mainly from specific areas that were accessible to the researcher and within the university's reach. Because of this, the study might not fully reflect the diverse experiences of teachers working in more remote or outer island schools, where challenges to inclusive education could be even more significant.

Self-Reported Data

We gathered data through semi-structured interviews, which relied on the teachers' own experiences and perceptions. While this approach is suitable for exploring personal experiences, it can be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias, especially if participants felt pressured to align their answers with what they thought was expected by the institution or academic standards.

Limited Representation of School Stakeholders

This study concentrated solely on teachers, leaving out the voices of other important stakeholders like school leaders, parents, students with disabilities, or support staff. This creates a somewhat incomplete picture of the inclusive education landscape and limits our ability to triangulate the findings.

References

- Armstrong AC, Johansson-Fua S, Armstrong D. Reconceptualizing inclusive education in the Pacific: Cultural frameworks and relational pedagogies. Suva: Pacific Disability Forum; 2021.
- Artiles AJ, Kozleski EB, Dorn S, Christensen C. Inclusive education and the transformation of schooling: A cultural-historical perspective. In: Artiles AJ, Kozleski EB, Gallagher AL, editors. *Inclusive education: Examining equity on five continents*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press; 2011. p. 36-62.
- Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006;3(2):77-101.
- Creswell JW, Poth CN. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications; 2018.
- Florian L. On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 2019;23(5):691-704.
- Florian L, Black-Hawkins K. Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*. 2011;37(5):813-828.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>
- Forlin C. *Teacher education for inclusion: Changing paradigms and innovative approaches*. London: Routledge; 2010.
- Forlin C, Lian MGJ. *Inclusion in education: Re-examining the principles*. London: Routledge; 2022.
- Government of Vanuatu. *Vanuatu Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2018-2025*. Port Vila: Ministry of Justice and Community Services; 2018.
- Government of Vanuatu. *Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030*. Port Vila: Ministry of Education and Training; 2024.
- Hlatywayo L, Arthur K, Hlatywayo S. Reconceptualising inclusive education in Vanuatu: The need for a contextualised model integrating special education components. *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Insights*. 2025;1(1). Available from: <https://tetronpublications.com/current-ejmi/>
- Mahuri D, Dorovolomo J, Mwarakurmes A. Teachers' perceptions of sociocultural influences on student learning: A case study from North Pentecost, Vanuatu. *Journal of Pacific Education Studies*. 2023;9(1):42-56.
- Miles S, Lene L, Merumeru L. Networking for inclusion in the Pacific Islands. *Pacific Disability Forum Working Paper Series*. 2014.
- Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). *Barriers to education study: Internal report*. Port Vila: Government of Vanuatu; 2024.
- Pacific Disability Forum. *Pacific regional inclusive education review*. Suva: Pacific Disability Forum; 2022. Available from: https://pacificdisability.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Pacific-IE-Report_2022.pdf
- Page A, Mafi S, Taripo A. Exploring inclusive education in the Cook Islands: Teachers' attitudes and needs. *Pacific-Asia Education*. 2019;31(2):17-32.
- Sharma U, Forlin C, Sprunt B, Merumeru L. Developing disability-inclusive indicators in the Pacific Islands. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 2016;20(10):1018-1033.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145267>
- Sharma U, Jitoko F, Macanawai S, Forlin C. Addressing barriers to inclusive education in the Pacific Islands. *Australia Awards Short Course Report*. 2018. Available from: https://www.australiaawardsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/5_Addressing-barriers-to-implementing-inclusive-education-in-the-Pacific.pdf
- Sharma U, Loreman T, Macanawai S. Factors contributing to the implementation of inclusive education in Pacific Island countries. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 2016;20(4):397-412.
- Slee R. *Inclusive education isn't dead, it just smells funny*. London: Routledge; 2018.
- Sprunt B, Florian L. Including the excluded: Supporting teachers to include learners with disabilities in the Pacific Islands. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 2020;24(12):1284-1300.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1514756>
- UNESCO. *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education All means all*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; 2020.

- Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; 2020. Available from: <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion>
23. United Nations. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). New York: United Nations; 2006. Available from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>
24. World Health Organization, World Bank. World report on disability. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2011. Available from: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564182>