

Beyond Access: Repositioning Education for Equity, Inclusion and Digital Justice in Fiji and the Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Across Fiji and the Pacific, education is increasingly expected to prepare learners for digitally changing, climate-affected and economically uncertain futures. Yet educational opportunity remains uneven. Learners in rural, remote and maritime communities often face barriers relating to connectivity, devices, transport, poverty, disability support, language, school resources and access to qualified teachers. These inequalities are not separate challenges; they intersect to shape who can participate meaningfully in education, whose knowledge is valued and who benefits from technological and policy change. This paper critically examines equity, access and inclusion in Fiji and the wider Pacific through the concept of digital justice. It argues that access should not be measured only by enrolment, school attendance or the availability of technology. Meaningful inclusion requires reliable infrastructure, affordable connectivity, appropriate devices, culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive assessment, teacher capability, disability support and recognition of Indigenous and local knowledge. Drawing on Pacific relational perspectives, the paper further argues that educational equity must be understood in relation to community, place, language, culture and collective well-being.

The paper identifies a continuing tension between national commitments to modernisation and the uneven realities experienced by learners and schools. It proposes a Fiji- and Pacific-responsive approach that combines targeted resource allocation, strengthened teacher development, accessible digital learning, community participation and culturally grounded policy implementation. The paper concludes that educational transformation will be equitable only when it moves beyond providing access towards ensuring that every learner has the capability, dignity and meaningful opportunity to learn, participate and flourish.

Keywords: educational equity; inclusive education; digital justice; Fiji; Pacific education; rural and maritime communities.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a central pathway through which individuals and communities develop knowledge, capabilities, dignity and opportunities for social and economic participation. Yet access to education does not automatically produce equity. A learner may be enrolled in school but still experience exclusion through poverty, disability, language barriers, weak infrastructure, geographical isolation, culturally irrelevant learning, unequal teacher support or limited access to digital resources. The central challenge for education systems is therefore not simply to open the school gate, but to ensure that every learner can participate meaningfully, learn with dignity and achieve valued educational outcomes.

This challenge is particularly urgent in Fiji and the Pacific. The region is characterised by geographically dispersed islands,

rural and maritime communities, varied languages and cultures, unequal household resources and vulnerability to climate-related disruption. These conditions shape the everyday realities of educational access. Learners in urban centres may have comparatively stronger access to schools, qualified teachers, transport, electricity, libraries, devices and stable internet connectivity. By contrast, learners in rural, remote and maritime communities may face longer travel distances, limited specialist support, intermittent connectivity, fewer learning resources and higher costs associated with participation. Such differences mean that equal provision does not necessarily create equitable educational opportunity.

The concept of equity is useful in addressing this problem. Equality involves providing the same resources or treatment to everyone. Equity, however, recognises that learners begin from different circumstances and may require differentiated support in order to enjoy

comparable educational opportunities. Sen's (1999) Capability Approach is particularly relevant because it shifts attention from the resources individuals possess to what they are genuinely able to do and become. In educational terms, providing a laptop or internet connection is not sufficient if learners lack electricity, affordable data, accessible content, teacher guidance, safe learning spaces or the confidence to use technology meaningfully. Equity therefore requires attention to the conditions that enable learners to convert educational resources into real learning and life opportunities.

Inclusion extends this argument further. Inclusive education is not simply the placement of diverse learners within the same school or classroom. It requires education systems to identify and remove barriers to participation, achievement and belonging. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that inclusion concerns all learners, particularly those who experience marginalisation because of disability, poverty, gender, ethnicity, language, location, displacement or other social circumstances. In the Fiji and Pacific context, inclusive education must also recognise the diversity of Indigenous, cultural, linguistic and community knowledge systems that learners bring to school. A system cannot claim to be inclusive if it provides access while treating local language, culture, identity and community knowledge as secondary to externally defined forms of achievement.

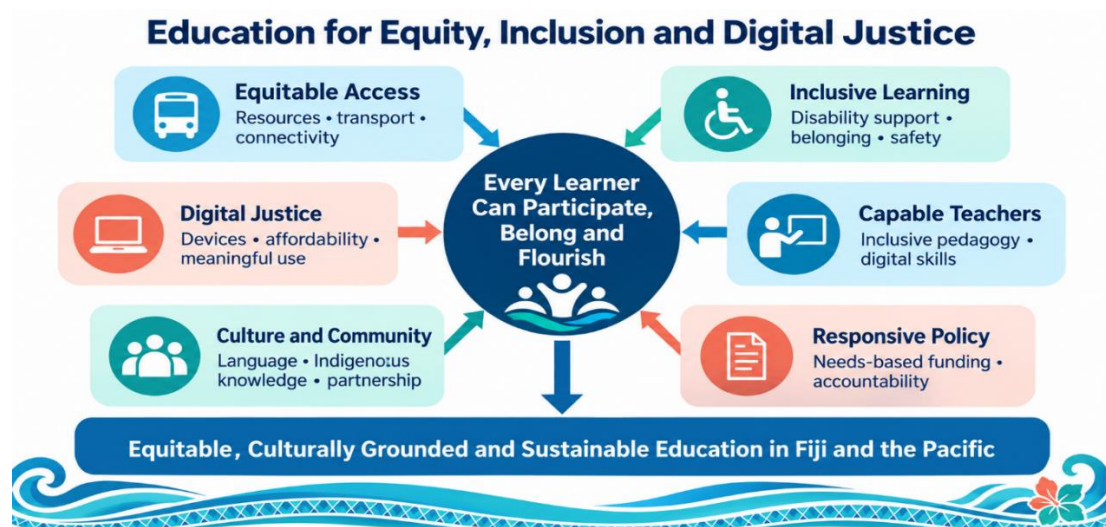
Digital transformation has made these questions more urgent. Technology can expand access to educational materials, connect remote learners, support differentiated learning and create new opportunities for communication and collaboration. However, it can also reproduce or deepen existing inequalities. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report cautions that technology in education is not inherently equitable; its value depends on who has access, how it is used, whose interests it serves and whether adequate conditions exist for meaningful participation (UNESCO, 2023). The digital

divide is therefore not only a gap in internet connectivity. It is a multi-layered divide involving devices, affordability, electricity, digital skills, teacher capability, accessible learning content, school policy and household support (Warschauer, 2004).

For Fiji and the Pacific, the idea of **digital justice** provides a stronger framework than technology access alone. Digital justice asks whether technological change distributes opportunity fairly, protects human dignity, recognises cultural and linguistic diversity and enables meaningful participation for those most likely to be excluded. It challenges the assumption that technology automatically modernises education. Instead, it asks whether digital initiatives reduce or reinforce disparities between urban and rural schools, well-resourced and under-resourced households, connected and disconnected communities, and learners whose needs are recognised or overlooked.

Digital justice must also be culturally grounded. Pacific educational scholarship has long argued that knowledge is relational, connected to place, community, language and identity. Nabobo-Baba (2006) demonstrates the significance of Indigenous Fijian ways of knowing and learning, while Thaman (2003) calls for educational systems to recognise Pacific knowledge, values and cultural legitimacy. These perspectives are especially important in debates about digital education. Technologies and international policy models should inform educational development, but they should not displace local knowledge, community authority or culturally meaningful ways of learning. The relevant question is not whether Fiji and the Pacific should adopt digital tools, but how technology can be adapted to strengthen educational opportunity while respecting culture, language, relationship and local priorities.

Figure 1. Education for Equity, Inclusion and Digital Justice in Fiji and the Pacific



Source: Developed by the researcher from the paper's conceptual framework and relevant literature on equity, inclusion, digital justice and Pacific education.

The Pacific Regional Education Framework 2018–2030 similarly identifies equity, quality, inclusion and lifelong learning as central regional priorities (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018). These commitments require education systems to move beyond broad policy aspirations and examine implementation at the level of schools, teachers, learners and communities. Policy commitments to digital learning or inclusive education will have limited impact if schools lack functional infrastructure, teachers lack professional support, learners cannot afford access, or communities are excluded from decision-making.

This paper, therefore, examines how Fiji and Pacific education systems can move **beyond access** towards equity, inclusion and digital justice. It argues that meaningful educational transformation requires more than technology provision, enrolment expansion or general policy statements. It requires targeted support for rural, remote and marginalised learners; sustained teacher development; accessible and culturally responsive curriculum; inclusive assessment; reliable digital infrastructure; community participation; and implementation mechanisms that are accountable to local realities. By bringing these dimensions together, the paper contributes to current debates on how education in Oceania can become more equitable, inclusive, culturally grounded and responsive to an increasingly digital and uncertain future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section critically reviews literature on educational equity, inclusion and digital justice, with particular attention to Fiji and Pacific contexts. It examines how access, learner participation, teacher capability, technology, Indigenous knowledge and policy implementation interact to shape educational opportunity. The review then identifies gaps that justify a more integrated and culturally grounded approach to equitable education in the region.

Equity, access and meaningful educational opportunity

Educational equity has moved beyond the narrow question of whether learners can enrol in school. Contemporary scholarship recognises that equitable education concerns the distribution of resources, learning opportunities, recognition, participation and outcomes. Fraser (2008) argues that justice requires attention to redistribution, recognition and representation. Applied to education, redistribution concerns resources such as qualified teachers, learning materials, transport, disability support and digital infrastructure. Recognition concerns whether learners' identities, languages,

cultures and knowledge are respected. Representation concerns whether learners, families and communities are able to participate in decisions that affect their education. The Capability Approach provides a complementary perspective. Sen (1999) argues that development should be assessed through people's substantive freedoms—their real opportunities to do and become what they value. In education, this means that access to a school, device or curriculum does not automatically produce meaningful learning. A learner may have a textbook but lack a qualified teacher; may have a digital device but lack internet access; or may attend school but be excluded by language, disability, poverty or culturally unfamiliar curriculum content. Equity therefore requires education systems to consider the conditions that enable different learners to convert resources into genuine educational participation and achievement.

This distinction is important in Fiji and the Pacific, where educational opportunity is shaped by geography, transport, household income, school size, availability of specialist teachers and access to public services. A uniform policy intervention may appear equal, but may not be equitable if it does not respond to different local circumstances. Rural, remote and maritime schools may require more sustained support than urban schools to achieve comparable learning conditions. Equity must therefore be needs-based, context-sensitive and responsive to the multiple disadvantages that can affect learners simultaneously.

Inclusion, belonging and participation

Inclusive education is frequently associated with disability, but the literature stresses that inclusion is broader. It concerns the removal of barriers affecting all learners who experience marginalisation or exclusion. UNESCO (2020) defines inclusion as a process of addressing the diversity of learners' needs through increased participation in learning, cultures and communities, while reducing exclusion from and within education. This definition shifts attention from whether learners are physically present in school to whether they can participate, belong and learn meaningfully.

Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusion requires schools to examine how their ordinary policies, practices and cultures can create exclusion. For example, rigid assessment, inaccessible buildings, inflexible teaching methods, language barriers, bullying, low expectations and inadequate teacher preparation may prevent learners from participating fully even when they are formally enrolled. Inclusive education therefore requires changes in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher education, leadership and community engagement.

In Fiji and the Pacific, inclusion must be understood in relation to disability, gender, poverty, rurality, ethnicity, language, migration, family circumstances and cultural identity. Learners may experience several of these barriers at the same time. A child in a remote community who has a disability, limited household income and weak access to technology may face cumulative disadvantage that cannot be addressed through a single intervention. Inclusive policy must therefore be intersectional: it should recognise that educational disadvantage is often produced through overlapping social, geographical and institutional conditions.

Belonging is also a central dimension of inclusion. Learners are more likely to participate meaningfully when they feel respected, visible and valued. Schools should not expect students to leave their language, cultural identity or community knowledge outside the classroom. Instead, inclusive education should create space for diverse learners to see themselves, their histories and their communities reflected in curriculum and pedagogy.

Digital justice and the multi-layered digital divide

The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed the meaning of educational access. Technology can connect learners to information, support flexible learning, widen access to professional development and enable new forms of collaboration. At the same time, it may intensify inequality where access to devices, connectivity, electricity and digital skills is uneven. Warschauer (2004) argues that the digital divide should not be understood simply as a division between those who have technology and those who do not. It includes differences in physical resources, digital skills, social support, relevant content and opportunities for meaningful use.

UNESCO (2023) similarly cautions against technological determinism. Technology does not automatically improve education; its contribution depends on appropriate infrastructure, teacher capability, accessibility, governance, content quality and the educational purpose for which it is used. A school may possess computers but lack reliable connectivity, maintenance support, teacher confidence or policies that allow technology to be integrated into teaching. Similarly, a learner may have access to a smartphone but lack affordable data, a quiet place to study, accessible learning platforms or support from teachers and family members.

The concept of digital justice is useful because it places fairness and participation at the centre of technological change. Digital justice asks who gains from digital education, who remains excluded, whose data and knowledge are protected, and whether digital systems expand or limit learner agency. Eubanks (2018) warns that digital systems can reproduce disadvantage when they are designed without sufficient attention to social inequality and accountability. In education, this means that digital initiatives should be

evaluated not only by the number of devices distributed or platforms introduced, but by whether they improve learning opportunities for disadvantaged learners.

For Fiji and the Pacific, digital justice includes reliable infrastructure, affordable access, accessible technology, teacher preparation, culturally relevant digital content and community participation in implementation. It also requires attention to rural and maritime realities, where transport costs, electricity supply, connectivity and maintenance may differ significantly from urban settings. Digital transformation that overlooks these conditions may widen the gap between already advantaged learners and those experiencing multiple forms of exclusion.

Teacher capability and inclusive pedagogy

Teachers are central to educational equity, inclusion and digital justice. They translate policy into classroom practice, determine how curriculum is interpreted and create the daily learning environment in which students either participate or become marginalised. The World Bank (2018) notes that learning depends fundamentally on the quality of teaching and the support available to teachers. This is particularly relevant where teachers are expected to respond to learner diversity, use digital tools, address disability inclusion, integrate local knowledge and prepare students for changing social and technological futures.

Inclusive pedagogy requires more than goodwill. Teachers need knowledge, skills, time, resources and professional support to adapt instruction, use multiple assessment approaches, differentiate learning and create respectful classroom cultures. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy should avoid treating some learners as separate from the “normal” classroom. Instead, teachers should design learning opportunities that extend participation for everyone while responding to individual needs.

Digital inclusion also depends on teacher capability. UNESCO (2023) emphasises that technology is most effective when teachers are able to use it purposefully in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. One-off technical training is therefore insufficient. Teachers require sustained professional learning in digital pedagogy, accessibility, online safety, ethical technology use, assessment and culturally responsive practice. In Fiji and the Pacific, professional development should also support teachers to connect technology with local language, culture, environment and community knowledge rather than relying only on imported content or models.

Indigenous knowledge, Pacific relationality and culturally responsive education

A major limitation of many international equity frameworks is that they are developed primarily in large, economically resourced systems and may not adequately account for Indigenous, local and relational understandings of education. Pacific scholarship emphasises that knowledge is connected to culture, language, place, spirituality, community and relationships. Nabobo-Baba (2006) highlights the significance of Indigenous Fijian ways of knowing and learning, while Thaman (2003) argues that Pacific education must challenge the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge within formal education systems.

These perspectives are essential to culturally responsive education. A curriculum may promote equality in formal terms while still excluding learners if it gives little recognition to their language, local histories, ecological knowledge, cultural values or community responsibilities. Culturally responsive education does not reject global knowledge, science or digital innovation. Rather, it seeks a more balanced relationship in which learners can engage with global knowledge while retaining cultural confidence and local relevance.

Pacific relational approaches, including *talanoa*, *vanua*, *vā* and *tok stori*, also have implications for inclusion. They foreground listening, dialogue, reciprocity and collective responsibility. Such approaches can strengthen relationships between schools, families and communities, particularly when reform involves sensitive issues such as disability, gender, language, digital technology or curriculum change. Community participation is not an optional addition to educational reform; it is essential to ensuring that policies are understood, trusted and adapted to local realities.

Policy implementation and institutional capacity

The literature shows that progressive policy language does not automatically produce equitable outcomes. Policy implementation depends on funding, leadership, monitoring, teacher capability, coordination, data and local adaptation. Honig (2006) argues that implementation is a complex process shaped by the interaction of policy, people and context. This is particularly relevant to education systems in which schools have unequal starting points and different levels of capacity.

The Pacific Regional Education Framework 2018–2030 provides an important regional commitment to quality, equity and inclusion (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018). However, the translation of regional and national commitments into school-level change requires clear responsibilities, sustained resources and evidence-based monitoring. Policies on digital learning, inclusive education or rural support may remain aspirational if schools are not equipped to implement them.

For Fiji, policy implementation must respond to the realities of urban, rural and maritime education. Schools differ in connectivity, transport access, enrolment size, teacher supply, community resources and exposure to climate-related disruption. This means that universal interventions should be complemented by targeted measures for contexts experiencing the greatest barriers. Monitoring should also assess meaningful participation and learning, not only inputs such as devices distributed, teacher workshops completed or policies approved.

Table 1. Key Dimensions of Equity, Inclusion and Digital Justice in Fiji and the Pacific

Dimension	Key concern	Fiji and Pacific implication
Equitable access	Unequal resources and opportunities	Rural, remote and maritime schools may require differentiated funding, transport, infrastructure and learning resources.
Inclusion	Barriers to participation and belonging	Learners with disabilities, language differences and socio-economic disadvantage require accessible and responsive support.
Digital justice	Unequal access to technology and meaningful use	Devices must be accompanied by connectivity, affordability, teacher capability, accessible content and maintenance.
Cultural responsiveness	Recognition of identity and local knowledge	Curriculum should value Pacific languages, Indigenous knowledge, community relationships and local realities.
Teacher capability	Ability to create inclusive learning	Teachers need sustained development in inclusive pedagogy, digital learning and culturally responsive practice.

Policy implementation	Gap between commitment and practice	National policy requires local adaptation, monitoring, community participation and accountable resourcing.
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Source: Developed by the researcher from Sen (1999), Fraser (2008), UNESCO (2020, 2023), Nabobo-Baba (2006), and Thaman (2003).

LITERATURE GAPS

The first gap concerns the relationship between educational access and meaningful participation. Much policy discussion continues to measure progress through enrolment, infrastructure provision or the number of digital devices distributed. While these indicators are important, they do not adequately explain whether learners can use resources effectively, participate with dignity or achieve meaningful learning outcomes. There is a need for Fiji- and Pacific-focused research that examines educational opportunity through a broader capability and digital-justice lens.

The second gap concerns the multi-layered nature of digital exclusion. Existing studies often focus on connectivity or device ownership as separate issues. Less attention has been given to how infrastructure, affordability, teacher capability, school policy, accessible content, household support and pedagogical opportunity interact to shape participation. Research is needed to understand how these layers combine in rural, remote and maritime settings, especially for learners already affected by poverty, disability or other forms of disadvantage.

The third gap concerns culturally grounded inclusion. International inclusive-education literature provides valuable frameworks, but there remains limited research on how Pacific relational values, Indigenous knowledge systems, community expectations and local languages can be integrated into inclusive and digitally enabled education. Further work is needed to identify approaches that support disability inclusion, learner diversity and digital participation without marginalising Pacific identities and knowledge.

The fourth gap concerns teacher professional learning. There is a need for more evidence on the forms of teacher development that enable educators to respond simultaneously to digital transformation, inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive practice and changing assessment demands. Research should examine not only whether teachers receive training, but whether they are able to apply new knowledge in classrooms affected by unequal infrastructure, large workloads and limited technical support.

The fifth gap concerns policy implementation and accountability. Fiji and Pacific education systems have policy

commitments relating to quality, inclusion, digital learning and sustainable development. However, further research is needed on how these commitments are implemented across different school contexts, how resources are allocated, how communities participate and how progress is monitored. Such evidence would help ensure that policy success is measured by reduced participation gaps and improved learner opportunity rather than by policy intention alone.

This paper responds to these gaps by bringing equity, inclusion, digital justice, teacher capability, Pacific relationality and policy implementation into a single analytical framework. It contributes a Fiji- and Pacific-focused perspective that treats educational transformation not as a matter of technology or access alone, but as a question of whether all learners can participate, belong, learn and flourish.

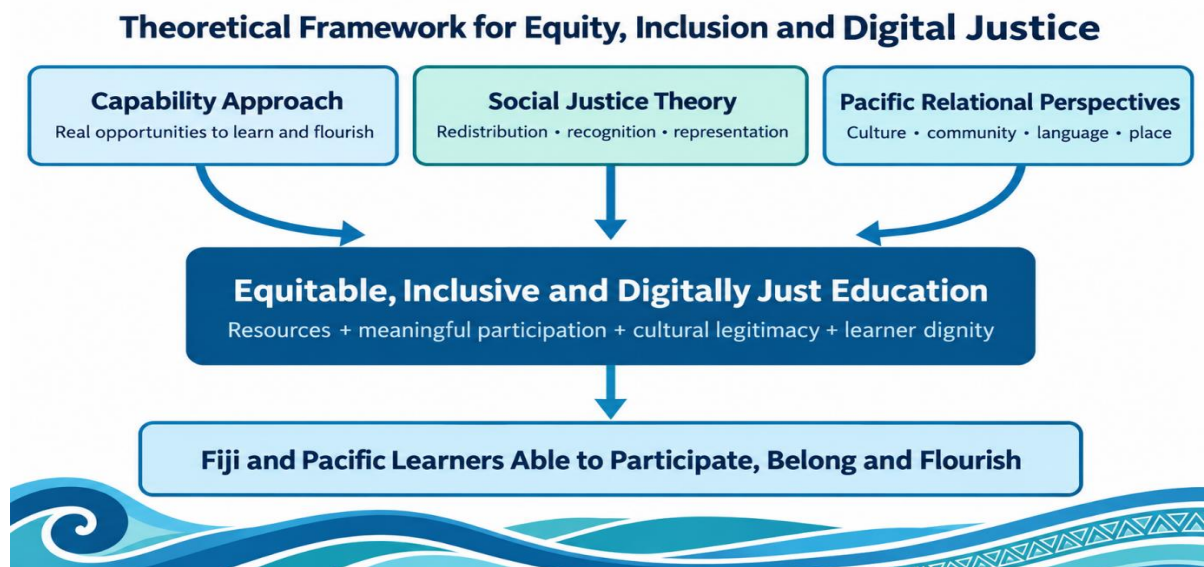
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is guided by the **Capability Approach**, **Social Justice Theory** and **Pacific relational perspectives**. The Capability Approach emphasises that educational equity should be assessed not only by the resources learners receive, but by their real opportunities to participate, learn and flourish (Sen, 1999). It therefore helps explain why school enrolment, devices or internet access alone do not ensure meaningful educational inclusion.

Social Justice Theory complements this perspective by emphasising redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2008). In education, this means that equitable reform requires fair allocation of resources, recognition of diverse identities and knowledge systems, and meaningful participation of learners, families and communities in decision-making.

Finally, Pacific relational perspectives recognise that education is connected to culture, language, community, place and reciprocal relationships. Drawing on Indigenous Fijian and Pacific scholarship, the paper argues that inclusion must be culturally grounded and responsive to local knowledge, values and community realities (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2003). Together, these perspectives guide the paper's analysis of how Fiji and Pacific education systems can move beyond access towards equitable, inclusive and digitally just educational transformation.

Figure 2. Theoretical Framework for Equity, Inclusion and Digital Justice in Fiji and the Pacific



Source: Developed by the researcher, drawing on the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), Social Justice Theory (Fraser, 2008), and Pacific educational perspectives (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2003).

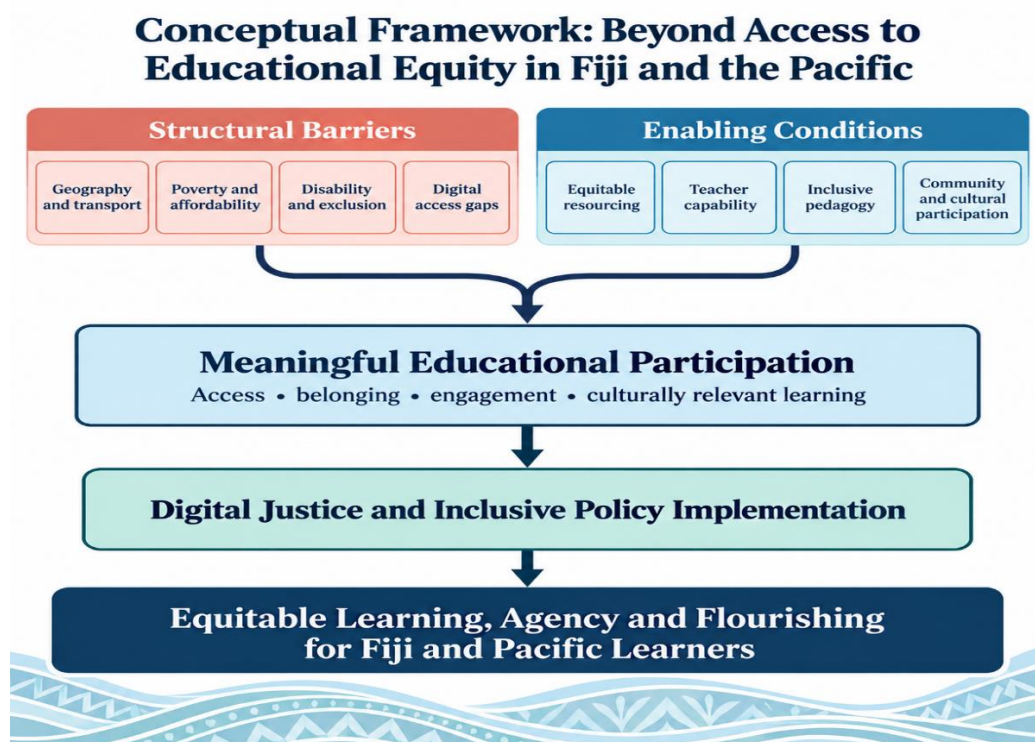
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework proposes that equity, inclusion and digital justice in Fiji and the Pacific are shaped by the interaction between structural barriers and enabling educational conditions. Barriers such as geographical isolation, poverty, disability-related exclusion and unequal

digital access can restrict learners' participation. However, these barriers can be reduced through equitable resource allocation, capable teachers, inclusive pedagogy and meaningful community and cultural participation.

The framework positions meaningful educational participation—access, belonging, engagement and culturally relevant learning—as the essential bridge between policy intentions and learner outcomes. When inclusive policy implementation and digital justice are embedded within this process, education is more likely to produce equitable learning, learner agency and flourishing across diverse Fiji and Pacific communities.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework: Beyond Access to Educational Equity in Fiji and the Pacific



Source: Developed by the researcher from the literature on equity, inclusion, digital justice and Pacific education.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This discussion argues that educational equity in Fiji and the Pacific cannot be achieved through access alone. School enrolment, technology distribution, curriculum reform and policy commitments are important, but they do not necessarily ensure that learners can participate meaningfully, experience belonging or achieve valued outcomes. The conceptual framework developed in this paper shows that educational opportunity is shaped by the interaction between structural barriers, enabling conditions, meaningful participation, digital justice and inclusive policy implementation. The central issue is therefore not whether education systems provide the same opportunities in formal terms, but whether they create the conditions through which diverse learners can genuinely learn, contribute and flourish.

From formal access to meaningful participation

The distinction between access and meaningful participation is fundamental. Formal access may involve school enrolment, a place in a classroom, access to a device or the existence of an inclusive-education policy. However, these provisions do not automatically remove the barriers that prevent learners from benefiting from education. A learner may attend school regularly but have limited access to textbooks, internet connectivity, transport, specialist support or culturally relevant teaching. Similarly, a learner may be connected to a digital platform but lack an appropriate device, affordable data, electricity, a quiet study space or teacher support.

The Capability Approach is useful in interpreting this issue because it focuses on real opportunities rather than resources alone. Sen (1999) argues that individuals require the freedom and capability to use available resources in ways that enable them to achieve valued outcomes. Applied to education, this means that equity requires more than distributing identical resources. It requires recognising the circumstances that affect whether different learners can use those resources successfully. Rural and maritime learners, students with disabilities, learners from low-income households and those facing language or cultural barriers may require differentiated support to reach comparable levels of participation.

This interpretation challenges a “one-size-fits-all” approach to policy. Providing every school with the same number of devices, for example, may appear equal, but it may not be equitable if some schools lack reliable electricity, internet access, technical support or teachers confident in digital pedagogy. Likewise, a national curriculum may establish common learning outcomes, but these outcomes may be difficult to achieve where learners have unequal access to

teachers, resources and learning environments. Educational policy must therefore be judged by its capacity to reduce the effects of structural disadvantage rather than by the uniformity of its provision.

Geography, poverty and unequal educational conditions

Fiji and the Pacific present distinctive geographical challenges for educational equity. The distance between islands, the location of rural and remote communities, transport costs, uneven access to public infrastructure and exposure to climate-related disruption can affect attendance, teacher deployment, resource supply and continuity of learning. Learners in urban centres may have comparatively greater access to schools, libraries, devices, stable connectivity and specialised support. Learners in rural, remote and maritime communities may face multiple barriers at once.

Poverty further intensifies these geographical inequalities. Household resources influence whether learners can afford transport, uniforms, meals, learning materials, data, devices and private study space. Even where schooling is formally available, the indirect costs of participation may be substantial. The resulting disadvantage is cumulative: limited household resources may combine with weak connectivity, fewer school facilities and reduced access to private tutoring or educational support. Fraser’s (2008) concept of redistribution is particularly relevant here because it highlights the need to allocate resources according to need rather than assuming that equal distribution will produce fair outcomes.

This analysis suggests that equity policy in Fiji and the Pacific should be differentiated. Rural, remote and maritime schools may require higher levels of infrastructure investment, transport support, maintenance funding, teacher incentives, learning materials and community-based services. Such support should not be viewed as special treatment. It is necessary to compensate for the structural conditions that make educational participation more difficult. A fair education system therefore provides additional support where barriers are greatest.

Inclusion, disability and the right to belong

Inclusion is often discussed in relation to disability, but it should be understood as a system-wide commitment to removing barriers affecting all learners. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that inclusion requires increased participation in learning, cultures and communities, together with a reduction in exclusion. This definition is important because it moves beyond physical placement. A

learner with a disability may be enrolled in a mainstream school but remain excluded if classrooms, materials, assessments, communication systems and teacher practices are inaccessible.

Inclusion also concerns the experience of belonging. Learners are more likely to engage when they feel respected, safe and valued. Conversely, exclusion can occur through low expectations, bullying, stigma, inaccessible facilities, rigid assessment, language barriers or curriculum that ignores learners' identities and experiences. Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusion requires schools to examine how their everyday cultures, policies and practices may produce exclusion. This requires school leaders and teachers to move beyond viewing inclusion as the responsibility of a specialist teacher or programme.

For Fiji and the Pacific, inclusive education should involve early identification of learner needs, accessible facilities and resources, teacher preparation, family engagement and flexible curriculum and assessment. It should also recognise that disability is often accompanied by additional disadvantages related to poverty, geography or limited specialist services. Learners with disabilities in remote locations may face a deeper level of exclusion because the support available in urban schools is not accessible to them. Inclusive policy must therefore address both learner needs and the unequal capacity of schools to respond.

Digital justice: technology as opportunity or exclusion

Technology has become central to contemporary education, but it can function either as an opportunity or a new source of exclusion. Digital learning has the potential to connect students to information, learning platforms, teachers and wider communities. It can support flexible learning, assistive technologies, collaboration and access to educational resources that may otherwise be unavailable. These possibilities are especially significant for geographically dispersed Pacific communities.

However, the benefits of technology are not distributed evenly. UNESCO (2023) cautions that technology in education should not be assumed to be inherently beneficial or equitable. Its value depends on the conditions of implementation, including infrastructure, affordability, accessibility, teacher capability, content relevance and governance. Where these conditions are absent, technology may reinforce pre-existing social inequalities.

Warschauer (2004) explains that the digital divide is multi-layered. It includes not only access to devices and connectivity but also the skills, social support, relevant content and opportunities needed for meaningful use. This insight is particularly relevant in Fiji and the Pacific. A learner may have a smartphone but may not have sufficient data, stable network coverage, a suitable device for extended learning, digital

literacy, parental support or a teacher who can integrate technology effectively. Similarly, schools may receive computers but lack maintenance, reliable internet, security, technical support or professional development.

Digital justice therefore requires a shift from technology procurement to meaningful digital participation. Policies should consider affordability, device quality, connectivity, electricity, maintenance, accessibility for learners with disabilities, local-language content, teacher development and digital safety. Targeted support should prioritise learners and schools experiencing the greatest barriers, including rural and maritime communities. Technology should be evaluated not by its visibility, but by whether it expands learner capability, participation and dignity.

Teacher capability as the human foundation of inclusion

Teachers are the human foundation of equitable and inclusive education. They interpret curriculum, make decisions about pedagogy and assessment, manage classroom relationships and determine whether technology becomes a meaningful learning tool or remains unused. The World Bank (2018) emphasises that teaching quality is central to learning outcomes. This is particularly important in contexts where teachers are expected to respond to diverse learner needs, integrate digital technologies, recognise local knowledge and maintain learning continuity during disruption.

Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to plan learning in ways that extend participation for all learners. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy should not separate learners into fixed categories of "normal" and "different." Instead, it should create flexible learning opportunities that respond to diversity while maintaining high expectations. Such pedagogy may include differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, multiple forms of assessment, accessible materials, learner choice and the use of examples grounded in local experience.

In Fiji and the Pacific, teacher professional development should address inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, digital literacy, culturally responsive teaching, climate education, assessment and student well-being as connected capabilities. Teachers need time, mentoring, peer support and practical resources to apply these capabilities. One-off workshops are unlikely to produce sustained change, particularly where teachers work in resource-constrained schools. Professional learning should be school-based, continuous and linked to classroom practice.

Teacher capability is also essential for digital justice. A device does not teach; a platform does not automatically

create engagement; and online content does not necessarily respond to a learner's needs. Teachers are needed to select appropriate materials, guide learners, adapt activities, protect online safety and connect technology with meaningful pedagogy. Investment in teachers should therefore be treated as an equity strategy, not simply as a professional-development activity.

Culture, language and Indigenous knowledge as dimensions of inclusion

A major contribution of Pacific scholarship is its insistence that education cannot be separated from culture, language, relationship and place. Nabobo-Baba (2006) demonstrates that Indigenous Fijian knowledge systems offer important understandings of learning, identity and community. Thaman (2003) similarly argues that Pacific education must challenge the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge within formal curriculum and research. These perspectives are directly relevant to equity and inclusion.

Education becomes exclusionary when it treats local knowledge, language and cultural identity as less legitimate than externally defined knowledge. Learners may be physically included in school while experiencing cultural exclusion if their histories, values, ecological knowledge, languages and community practices are absent from curriculum. This concern is particularly important in Fiji's multiracial, multicultural and multireligious society, where educational reform must recognise diverse identities and experiences.

Culturally responsive education does not mean rejecting international curriculum standards, science, digital technology or global knowledge. Rather, it means creating meaningful connections between global and local knowledge. For example, climate and environmental education can combine scientific understanding with Indigenous ecological knowledge; digital storytelling can preserve oral histories and language; and community-based inquiry can connect school learning with local challenges. Such approaches may strengthen learner engagement because students can see the relevance of education to their lives, communities and futures. Pacific relational approaches also strengthen the social dimension of inclusion. *Talanoa*, *vanua*, *vā* and *tok stori* foreground respectful dialogue, relationship, reciprocity and collective responsibility. These principles can guide stronger partnerships among schools, families, learners, community leaders and policymakers. Community participation is particularly important where reforms involve new technologies, sensitive cultural questions, disability inclusion or changes in curriculum and assessment. Policies are more likely to succeed when they are developed and implemented with communities rather than imposed upon them.

Inclusive policy implementation and accountability

The discussion shows that policy intention and policy implementation are not the same. Governments and education systems may endorse equity, inclusion, digital learning and sustainable development, but the impact of these commitments depends on whether schools have the resources, capacity and support to enact them. Honig (2006) argues that policy implementation is shaped by the interaction between policy design, people and local context. This insight is highly relevant for Fiji and the Pacific, where schools operate under widely different conditions.

The Pacific Regional Education Framework 2018–2030 establishes important regional commitments to quality, equity and inclusion (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018). Yet these commitments require implementation mechanisms that connect national priorities with school and community realities. Clear standards for inclusive infrastructure, teacher support, connectivity, accessible learning materials and monitoring are necessary. At the same time, schools require flexibility to adapt implementation to their particular geographical, cultural and resource conditions.

Accountability should focus on meaningful outcomes rather than narrow inputs. Counting devices, training sessions or policy documents may show activity, but it does not demonstrate whether participation gaps have narrowed. Monitoring should examine whether learners from rural, maritime, low-income and disability-affected contexts are attending, participating, learning and progressing. It should also assess whether teachers have the capacity to use resources effectively and whether families and communities are involved in implementation.

Towards a Fiji- and Pacific-responsive pathway

Taken together, the analysis supports a Fiji- and Pacific-responsive pathway for educational equity, inclusion and digital justice. The pathway begins with equitable foundations: reliable infrastructure, accessible schools, targeted funding, transport support, devices, connectivity and disability-inclusive resources. These foundations must be accompanied by capable teachers who can translate resources into meaningful pedagogy.

The next requirement is culturally legitimate and inclusive learning. Curriculum, assessment and technology should enable learners to connect global knowledge with local culture, language, community and environmental realities. Learners should have opportunities to participate actively, work collaboratively, develop digital confidence and see their identities reflected in educational practice.

Finally, strong governance and community partnership

are needed to sustain reform. National policy should establish clear minimum standards and equitable funding mechanisms, while local schools and communities should participate in contextual implementation. This approach aligns with Fraser's (2008) emphasis on redistribution, recognition and representation, Sen's (1999) focus on substantive capability, and Pacific perspectives on relational and culturally grounded learning.

Overall, the paper argues that Fiji and the Pacific should not measure progress only by the expansion of schools, devices or digital platforms. Progress should be judged by whether learners who have historically faced exclusion gain real opportunities to participate, belong, learn and flourish. This is the deeper meaning of moving beyond access: creating an education system in which technology, policy, teaching and culture work together to advance justice, dignity and sustainable futures for all learners.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that equity, inclusion and digital justice in Fiji and the Pacific require a decisive shift beyond formal access. Enrolment, school buildings, technology provision and policy commitments are necessary foundations, but they do not by themselves guarantee that learners can participate meaningfully, experience belonging or achieve valued educational outcomes. The central question is not simply whether learners have access to education, but whether they have the real capability to learn, contribute and flourish regardless of geography, income, disability, language, culture or digital circumstances.

The analysis has shown that educational disadvantage is often cumulative. Rural, remote and maritime learners may experience unequal access to transport, connectivity, electricity, devices, specialised teachers and learning materials. Learners from low-income households may face additional barriers related to affordability, food security, private study space and family support. Learners with disabilities may encounter inaccessible facilities, materials, assessment and pedagogy. These conditions demonstrate why equal provision is not always equitable provision. As the Capability Approach emphasises, justice requires attention to the genuine opportunities people have to use available resources and achieve valued outcomes (Sen, 1999).

Digital transformation makes this challenge even more urgent. Technology can connect learners, expand access to knowledge and support more flexible forms of learning. Yet technology can also deepen inequality when it is introduced without reliable infrastructure, affordable access, accessible content, teacher capability and culturally relevant pedagogy. The digital divide is therefore not only a matter of devices or

internet access; it is a divide in meaningful participation, support and opportunity (UNESCO, 2023; Warschauer, 2004). Digital justice requires Fiji and Pacific education systems to ensure that technology strengthens, rather than weakens, equity and inclusion.

The paper has also emphasised that inclusion is cultural and relational as well as material. Education cannot be fully inclusive when learners' languages, identities, Indigenous knowledge, community relationships and local realities are marginalised. Pacific perspectives remind us that learning is connected to place, culture, reciprocity and collective well-being (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2003). A Fiji- and Pacific-responsive approach should therefore combine global knowledge and digital innovation with culturally legitimate curriculum, community participation and respect for local ways of knowing.

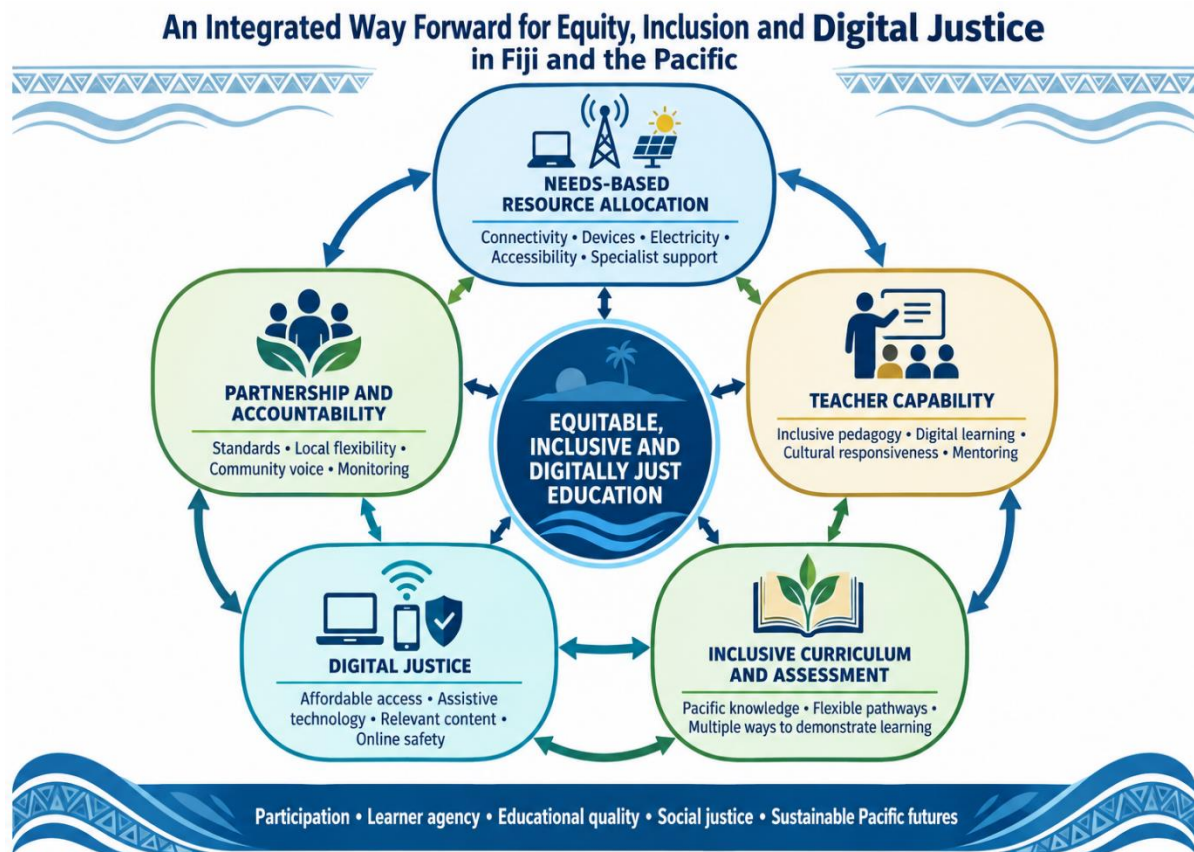
The way forward is an integrated approach. Governments, schools, teachers, communities and development partners must work together to provide equitable resources, strengthen teacher capability, remove disability-related barriers, improve rural and maritime connectivity, develop inclusive curriculum and assessment, and monitor whether reforms improve learner participation and outcomes. This approach reflects Fraser's (2008) argument that justice requires redistribution, recognition and representation. Learners need fair resources, respect for their identities and a meaningful voice in the educational decisions that affect them.

Ultimately, the success of educational transformation in Fiji and the Pacific should be measured not by the visibility of technology or the number of policies introduced, but by the quality and distribution of the opportunities created. When every learner can access relevant support, participate with dignity, see their culture valued and develop the capability to shape their own future, education becomes a genuine force for justice, resilience and sustainable Pacific development.

WAY FORWARD

The way forward for Fiji and the Pacific requires an integrated approach to educational transformation. Equity, inclusion and digital justice should not be treated as separate policy agendas. They are interconnected dimensions of educational quality. A learner cannot participate fully when connectivity is weak, teachers lack support, learning materials are inaccessible, assessment is rigid or curriculum does not recognise local culture and identity. Progress in one area will remain limited if weaknesses in other areas are ignored.

Figure 4. An Integrated Way Forward for Equity, Inclusion and Digital Justice in Fiji and the Pacific



Source: Author's conceptualisation, informed by Sen's (1999) *Capability Approach* and Fraser's (2008) *social justice framework*.

First, education systems should adopt a needs-based approach to resource allocation. Rural, remote and maritime schools, as well as schools serving learners facing poverty, disability-related barriers or other forms of disadvantage, require differentiated support. Connectivity, devices, maintenance, electricity, transport, accessible infrastructure and specialist services should be allocated according to demonstrated need rather than through identical provision. This approach reflects the Capability Approach, which emphasises that equity depends on people's real opportunities to benefit from available resources (Sen, 1999). Second, teacher capability should become a central priority. Teachers require sustained support in inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, digital learning, disability inclusion, assessment and learner well-being. Professional development should be ongoing, practical and linked to classroom realities rather than limited to one-off workshops. Teachers also need mentoring, time for collaboration and access to reliable teaching resources. Inclusive and digitally just education will not be achieved through technology alone; it depends on teachers who can use resources purposefully to expand participation and learning.

Third, curriculum and assessment should be made more inclusive, flexible and culturally grounded. Learners should encounter curriculum that reflects Pacific histories, languages, values, ecological knowledge and community realities, while also providing access to global knowledge and technological skills. Assessment should allow students to demonstrate learning through multiple approaches, including projects, oral presentations, practical tasks, portfolios, collaborative inquiry and community-based learning. Such approaches can widen participation and recognise diverse learner strengths.

Fourth, digital transformation should be guided by digital justice. Technology initiatives should be assessed according to whether they reduce or reproduce educational inequality. Governments and schools should prioritise affordable connectivity, accessible devices, local-language and culturally relevant content, assistive technologies, teacher preparation, online safety and technical maintenance. Digital tools should strengthen human relationships and learner agency rather than replace teachers, community knowledge or meaningful pedagogy.

Finally, policy implementation should be strengthened through partnership and accountability. National policies should establish clear minimum standards for equity, inclusion, accessibility and digital participation. At the

same time, schools and communities should have flexibility to adapt implementation to local geographical, cultural and resource conditions. Communities, parents, learners, teachers, disability advocates and local leaders should participate in planning and evaluating reforms. This approach reflects the importance of redistribution, recognition and representation in achieving social justice (Fraser, 2008).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the literature and analysis presented in this paper, the following recommendations outline practical actions for strengthening equity, inclusion and digital justice in Fiji and the Pacific. They are intended to support meaningful learner participation by addressing unequal resources, teacher capability, disability inclusion, culturally responsive curriculum, community engagement and accountable policy implementation.

Introduce an equity-based school resourcing framework

The Fiji Ministry of Education should strengthen needs-based funding and support for schools. Resource allocation should consider geographical location, enrolment, disability-related needs, household disadvantage, connectivity, electricity, transport and access to specialist services. Rural, remote and maritime schools should receive additional support where structural barriers make education more costly or difficult to provide.

Establish minimum standards for meaningful digital access

National standards should move beyond the number of devices distributed. Every school should progressively have access to reliable connectivity, functional devices, technical maintenance, secure data systems, accessible digital learning materials and teacher support. Monitoring should measure whether learners can use technology meaningfully for learning, not simply whether equipment is present in a school.

Strengthen inclusive teacher education and professional learning

Initial teacher education and continuing professional development should include inclusive pedagogy, universal design for learning, disability awareness, culturally responsive practice, digital pedagogy, online safety and assessment for diverse learners. Teachers should have access to mentoring, school-based coaching and professional-learning communities so that training is connected to classroom practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Improve disability inclusion and accessible learning

environments

Schools should progressively improve physical accessibility, learning materials, communication systems and assessment arrangements for learners with disabilities. Inclusive education should involve early identification of support needs, collaboration with families, specialist referral pathways and teacher access to practical guidance. Disability inclusion should be monitored across rural, urban and maritime settings to ensure that learners in remote communities are not left behind.

Develop culturally responsive curriculum and assessment

Curriculum reform should strengthen the integration of Indigenous and local knowledge, Pacific languages, oral traditions, environmental knowledge, community history and culturally meaningful learning. Assessment should provide multiple ways for learners to demonstrate achievement, including oral, practical, collaborative and project-based approaches. This would help ensure that educational success is not defined only through narrow written examinations or externally determined knowledge systems.

Create community-based equity and inclusion partnerships

Schools should establish structured opportunities for families, community leaders, disability advocates, youth representatives and local organisations to contribute to educational planning. Community participation can help identify barriers that are not visible through national data alone, including transport difficulties, affordability, cultural concerns, safety issues and local technology needs. Pacific relational approaches provide a strong basis for such partnership and dialogue (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2003).

Strengthen data, monitoring and accountability

Education authorities should develop an equity and inclusion dashboard that tracks attendance, participation, learning outcomes, connectivity, device access, disability support, teacher development and school resources across different geographical and social contexts. Data should be used to identify gaps and direct support, rather than to punish schools serving disadvantaged communities. Policy success should be assessed by reduced participation gaps and improved learner opportunity.

Support learner well-being, agency and voice

Schools should create safe and inclusive learning environments in which students can express concerns, participate in decisions and develop confidence in their identities and abilities. Learner voice is particularly important when schools introduce digital technologies, revise curriculum or develop inclusion strategies. Students should be treated as active partners in educational transformation rather than passive recipients of policy.

Build regional Pacific collaboration

Pacific governments, universities, teacher-education institutions and development partners should strengthen collaboration on inclusive education, digital access, climate-resilient schooling, teacher development and culturally grounded curriculum. Shared research, regional professional-learning networks and cooperative resource development can reduce duplication and strengthen the capacity of smaller island systems to respond to common challenges.

Table 2. Fiji- and Pacific-Responsive Recommendations for Equity, Inclusion and Digital Justice

Priority area	Recommended action	Intended outcome
School resourcing	Use needs-based funding for rural, remote, maritime and disadvantaged school communities.	More equitable educational conditions.
Digital access	Provide reliable connectivity, devices, maintenance and accessible digital resources.	Meaningful digital participation.
Teacher development	Provide continuous professional learning in inclusion, digital pedagogy and cultural responsiveness.	More capable and inclusive teachers.
Disability inclusion	Improve accessible infrastructure, learning materials, assessment and specialist support.	Greater participation and belonging for learners with disabilities.
Curriculum and assessment	Integrate local knowledge and use flexible assessment approaches.	Culturally relevant and inclusive learning.
Community partnership	Involve families, learners, community leaders and disability advocates in planning.	Locally legitimate and sustainable reform.
Monitoring and accountability	Track participation, resources, learner outcomes and equity gaps across contexts.	Evidence-based policy implementation.

Source: Developed by the researcher from the paper's analysis and recommendations, informed by UNESCO (2020, 2023), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2018), and World Bank (2018).

Taken together, these recommendations propose a transition from access-centred educational reform towards an approach grounded in capability, dignity, participation, cultural legitimacy and digital justice. Such a transition would enable Fiji and Pacific education systems to prepare learners not only for technological change, but also for equitable, inclusive and sustainable futures.

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