



REPORT ON PARENT WORKSHOP, SUVA FIJI OCTOBER 2007

This is a combined report from Gayle Skinner, President Australian Association of Parents of Vision Impaired (AAPVI), and Paul Manning, Executive Officer, Parents of Vision Impaired NZ (PVI-NZ).

Background:

At the World ICEVI Conference in Kuala Lumpur, July 2006, the *Education For All Children with Vision Impairments (EFA-VI)* global campaign was launched. In an attempt to encourage parents of developing nations to better understand and recognise the value of education, international parent support was sought. At the world conference the International Association of Parents of Vision Impaired was formally established through the ICEVI General Assembly.

An ICEVI Regional Pacific Forum was held at the University of Western Australia, Perth January 4-6th 2007. The ICEVI Pacific Region has two National parent bodies – AAPVI and PVI-NZ. At the Pacific Forum, an invitation was extended for Gayle Skinner and Paul Manning to become members of the ICEVI Pacific Regional Committee with a view to increasing parent participation within the Pacific region. The executive of ICEVI Pacific Region requested Paul and Gayle to assist wherever possible with the implementation of the Education for All – VI Pacific campaign. Following this request, an invitation was extended to Gayle and Paul by the Fijian delegation at the ICEVI Pacific January'07 Forum to come to Fiji and assist with the development of a national parent structure.

Personal Reflections

We were met at Nausori airport (Suva) on Sunday September 30th at around 7.35pm by the Coordinator of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR), Vilisi Salavabisi; President of the Suva parent group, Reverend Aporosa; and parent Alesi Rabitu. This welcome was totally unexpected and very much appreciated.

Monday October 1st was a preparation day at the Fijian Society for the Blind. Not only did we prepare for the three day workshop, we were shown around the Fijian school for the Blind, meeting a variety of teachers and children with a range of vision impairments. It was clear that they were very excited to show their school.

We were introduced to Mrs. Barbara Farouk, Executive Director of the school. It was at this stage that we handed over the canes we had acquired for the school. These were received very warmly.

Tuesday October 2nd: Day One of the Parent Workshop.

After the initial registration, the workshop was opened with the customary prayer and welcome speeches were delivered. Gayle and Paul were presented with a Salu Salu a ceremonial wreath made of tapa and flowers. We found this small ceremony very moving and one that made us feel accepted and valued. All participants then spent about one



hour introducing ourselves. These included the CBR fieldworkers, and parents who were asked to introduce themselves and their child/children. Some of these introductions were very emotional with a few finding it hard to share such personal information. It was clear through the sensitivity shown, we were in familiar territory.

We then received an overview of the services provided by the Fijian Society for the Blind. During the morning tea break, parents were eager to talk and share, have photos taken with us and their children.

We then heard from two parents who shared their families' stories. It was noted that both parents had their children enrolled at the Fiji School for the Blind. Over the course of the workshop we heard how many parents would relocate to Suva to enable their child to attend the school.

We then heard from a CBR fieldworker of a success she had concerning a child and their family through the identification of the child's sight loss condition and input from the CBR team. An education program is now being provided to this student and the parents understand the value of education for their child.

Following the lunch break, we had a presentation about the Suva PVI program. We heard how hard it has been for the parents to meet on a regular basis. The parents now meet weekly on a Friday, with prayers and sharing. We note the value of these meetings to the parents who are able to regularly attend.

Paul then gave a verbal presentation called "Parents Mobilizing Parents". He spoke of the value of parents coming together, sharing, supporting and empowering each other. He spoke of the NZ experience that he has been involved in for the past eighteen years. It was noticeable at the end of day one that no-one left in a hurry.

Gayle and Paul accompanied the children on the school bus to their homes. The cost of the school bus was fully donated by an IT company from Japan. This bus service is provided free of charge by Fiji School for the Blind to their families to ensure that children have access and attend school.

3rd October 2007: Day Two of the Parent Workshop

Day Two opened with prayer followed by a presentation by the Department of Social Welfare staff about child abuse. Again this presentation was well received, generating much thought.

Following morning tea, Gayle and Paul jointly presented "Programs for Parents". Gayle showed a short power-point about the variety of parent support programs available in Australia. She spoke about the personal learning that she had gone through in supporting her blind child's education. Parents then offered their own stories of how they have been able to support their blind and vision impaired children.

We noted that the Fijian parents were more comfortable with sharing the successes of their experiences during this session.



Following lunch, we had presentations from the CBR Fieldworkers, with reports on seven of the eight 8 regions. We heard of the many struggles the field workers face in getting parents to believe in education. Parental/cultural ignorance is still a problem for these staff. What impressed us was the determination of the CBR team to persevere, thus ensuring as many children as possible were able to attend school.

We then broke into small groups and heard of problems faced by parents. Issues included lack of information in a timely manner, lack of understanding of the value of social support systems, financial hardship, lack of family support or understanding, isolation, transportation, and lack of a positive dream and positive planning.

Gayle, Vilisi and Paul led a session on solutions. This generated much discussion with groups looking at different ways of solving problems. This session seemed to empower the parents into believing they could take some positive actions. It was well received.

Our day finished with prayer offered by Alesi.

4th October 2007: Day Three of the Parent Workshop

Day Three opened with prayer and we welcomed Frances Gentle, the Regional ICEVI Pacific Chairperson. Frances was given a Salu Salu and welcomed by Executive Director Mrs. B Farouk and Reverend Apo. Frances then spoke of the meeting in Nadi where many of the Pacific Nations Education Heads were meeting on how to further the introduction of "Inclusive Education". She reported that progress was being made. Frances also spoke of the need for parents to form national groups, encouraging the Fijian parents to do the same.

Gayle and Paul were dressed in traditional costume known as colourvati, a unique experience. Gayle then presented a power point on her many journeys with her daughter Shae. Here the parents heard a moving reflection from Gayle that was received with much warmth and respect. Gayle received many questions and support from the parents. A realization came from the parents that although we are from different cultures we have much in common.

Certificates of participation were then presented; these were extremely well received by the parents and CBR staff.

Gayle and Paul spoke formally and gave gifts with the formal closure given by Reverend Apo. This included prayer and singing; a wonderful way to close.

The evening was spent enjoying a "Lovo", a meal prepared traditionally. Again Gayle and Paul were presented with Salu Salu, and Kava was enjoyed by many. We met many of the family who were not able to attend the workshop. It was a very enjoyable evening.

We believe the following to be the **successful outcomes**:

- Combined attendance of parents and the CBR team
- The feeling of trust and support within the workshop that enabled sharing of personal experiences



-
- Greater understanding and respect of the knowledge that parents have of their children
 - Realisation by parents of future possibilities for their children through education
 - Recognition by parents of blind or vision impaired children that regardless of country of origin we all have similar needs
 - Accepted need of the development of regional parent networks across Fiji, in order to promote the establishment a national parent body

Agreed follow-up and further actions are:

- CBR team to assist and encourage regional parent networks across Fiji in their respective regions (Timeframe: next 6 months)
- A national parent forum with representatives from each Fiji regional parent group (Timeframe: approx 9 months time)
- Establishment of a National Parent Association (Timeframe: mid 2008)
- Continued support from PVI-NZ and AAPVI, including exploration of funding options to support the Fijian National Parent Body.

This has been a very worthwhile experience. We have learned from each other, provided guidance and support. We believe we have, by working with the Suva Parent community, developed a relationship that will lead to a National Fijian Parent group in the not too distant future.

Our sincere thanks to AusAID and ICEVI, whose financial support made our attendance at the Parent Workshop possible. We believe it was money well spent in furthering the EFA-VI Pacific campaign.

Gayle Skinner
President
Australian Association of Parents for Vision Impaired

Paul Manning
Executive Officer
Parents of Vision Impaired NZ