

CEHS Special Education Students Assist Fijian Teachers and Children in their Native Classrooms on Summer Study Abroad

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The CEHS study abroad participants at Suva Special School, Fiji.

A group of CEHS students recently spent two weeks working in Fiji schools, providing special education professional development to teachers and instruction to the children in the classrooms.

During June 2024, two elementary education undergrads in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) and 13 special education undergrads and recent graduates, along with two faculty members in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling (SPERC) in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS), participated in a study abroad program in the Republic of Fiji.

The summer study abroad was a first for the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling (SPERC) at USU. Heather Weese, special education faculty member, and Julia Lyman, project coordinator in SPERC, were the primary organizers and facilitators. Weese and Lyman partnered with YouthLinc, a non-profit organization that integrates academic and community-engaged study abroad programs. Youthlinc facilitated translations, accommodations, meals, and transportation around the island so the USU contingent could focus on their work in the schools.

Because most of the CEHS students who travelled to Fiji will begin their senior year this Fall or graduated in

May, about half of them had already completed their student teaching requirement. “We were lucky because our group already had a very good grasp of effective teaching practices,” says Weese. “Our students were truly amazing.”

Fiji’s education system places children with special needs in one of two types of schools: inclusive schools, where children of every ability attend the same class together, dependent only on age (similar to the structure of US schools), and special schools, where the entire school is dedicated to the education of children with special needs. USU students visited one inclusive school and two special schools on the island, one in the city of Suva, the former capital of Fiji, and two in Rakiraki, a rural area on the coast in the northern part of the island. Their primary focus was on providing special professional development to the teachers.

“The main thing we were teaching was explicit instruction, which is a common research-based teaching strategy used within both special education and regular education,” explains Weese. “The teacher models how to complete a task, then the student and teacher do it together. Once the student is at a mastery level, the student completes the task independently. This method can include academic instruction, self-care skills, vocational skills, etc. The teachers in Fiji were familiar with explicit instruction, but it wasn’t being implemented consistently.”

When the USU students weren’t helping with professional development, they were providing support to teachers in the classrooms. “Some teachers would say, ‘You can teach. You show me how,’” recalls Weese. “Our students would just jump in. They could adapt to fit the needs of the class on the fly. Our students were very prepared to model explicit instruction and to co-teach with the Fijian teacher.”

Lyman adds, “If you can get explicit instruction implemented in your classroom, it’s a win. Our students were modeling it in any setting—completing a math problem, reading a word, performing a skill with multiple steps—so teachers could see how it really works. Our hope is that the teachers will continue after we’re gone.”

Gracie Forbush, an elementary education major in TEAL, said, “Throughout the entire trip, I felt so much purpose in everything I did. Not only did I feel like I had an impact, but my heart was touched by each student I interacted with. My love for teaching grew stronger each day, and I can’t wait to make it my full-time career!”

A generous donation from Nucor, a steel manufacturer located in Northern Utah, enabled the group to bring

suitcases full of school supplies, leveled readers, and other items, which the students used in the classrooms and then gifted to the schools.



Julia Lyman and Heather Weese with the head of school at Suva Special School in Suva, Fiji.

The group saw a lot of enthusiasm from the local teachers and children as their methods were adopted in the classrooms. “We could immediately see the techniques we were sharing with them working in real time,” says Lyman.

But working in the schools wasn’t always easy. Sometimes the teachers were uncomfortable with the methods they were being introduced to. “We found that it was more difficult in the inclusive school we visited,” Lyman shares. “They were familiar with a lot of things we were sharing, but to implement it within the umbrella of special education was next steps for them.”

Weese explains, “We recognized that the culture and education system in Fiji is different from ours and we weren’t there to change it.”

The USU group spent a total of four days at each school participating in observations, teacher development training, and hands-on modeling in the classrooms. “By our third day, we were part of the community,” says Weese. “They wanted us to stay. The children would wait at the schoolyard fence for our bus to arrive and wave to us when we left in the afternoons.”

In addition, the school headmasters arranged for each CEHS student to visit the home of a local student so they could get a glimpse of family life. “We asked the families to share their experiences and the challenges they had raising a child with disabilities,” says Weese.

Lyman adds, “Seeing family life versus the education system were completely different experiences—and both of them were valuable—but stepping into the homes of the children had a huge impact on our students.”

Amber Taylor, a special education major, said about this experience, “We can gain a lot of valuable information from books and classes. However, when we take our education with us into other cultures, other countries, or other environments, our understanding is expanded in a way that can’t be taught in any other way.”

Aside from a beach day where they experienced Fiji as tourists do, the CEHS students were fully immersed in the culture of Fiji. “Everywhere we went—restaurants, grocery stores—people would say to us, ‘You are seeing the real Fiji,’” recalls Lyman. They even attended a Methodist church (with services spoken in native Fijian) in one of the villages near RakiRaki.

“Our goal for this study abroad was to provide an international experience for students to provide special education instruction. We feel like we met that goal,” says Lyman. “Overall, we had great success.”

Looking forward, both Weese and Lyman are enthusiastic about a return trip to the island nation. “We’re discussing what another study abroad would look like—if we’d go back to the same schools or if we’d visit other schools,” says Lyman. “Do we replicate what we did when we go back? We need to figure out what’s best for us as study abroad leaders and USU students and what’s best for the schools and communities of Fiji.”