



Australian Development Research Award: Research Brief

Reviewing approaches to education services for children with disabilities in Papua New Guinea

This study aimed to review educational approaches for children with disabilities in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and to analyse the extent to which their right to education is being upheld. Whilst the government ostensibly supports improved access to inclusive education (IE) through its policies, and indeed has signed a number of human rights treaties to support these rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, numerous challenges remain. To date there is little evidence or evaluation of the effectiveness of work by government or other service providers in this regard. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of investment into education for children with disabilities. The research found that despite some forward looking and inclusive policies that on paper support the education of children with disabilities, in practice these have had the unintended consequence of actually dis-incentivising mainstream schools from including children with disabilities in their classes. Therefore, despite the policy rhetoric, the government does not appear to be investing in - or indeed prioritising - the education of children with disabilities.



Research was undertaken over three years (2013-2016) in collaboration with the Department of Education, University of Goroka, to address issues related to the knowledge, awareness and preparedness of primary school level heads and teachers in the context of mainstream and special education schools; the preparedness of the system to accept, accommodate and support the education of children with disabilities; and the level of engagement between mainstream schools, SERCs and parents of children with disabilities.

The study was carried out in three schools and one SERC from one province in each of the four regions of PNG (NCD, Simbu, Madang and Rabaul). In total, data were collected from 12 primary schools, four SERCs, and seven teacher training colleges. A total of 244 teaching staff (mainstream and special education) were surveyed using a standardised questionnaire on teacher knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) around education for children with disabilities. This was complemented by focus group discussions with parents of children with disabilities and a series of key informant interviews with education sector specialists (including the National Department of Education and primary teacher training colleges).

Whilst current policies on paper are quite comprehensive, covering a wide range of issues and implementation strategies, the research identifies there are actually a number of disincentives to inclusion at the school level. These include the focus on SERCs to deliver education for children with disabilities. While SERCs are necessary to support inclusion, they need to be seen as an education *resource*, rather than, as currently happens, the preferred option for children with disabilities. The current focus means mainstream schools are not resourced to support IE; and teachers are not adequately trained to support IE. The policy focus needs to be revised in line with international human rights commitments to IE. Moreover, lack of government oversight and management of SERCs leads to fragmented and unequally distributed services, and even a lack of specialist teachers in the SERCs. For example, our research shows that around 30% of SERC teachers interviewed had not had any special education training.

It is also difficult to get clarity on the actual numbers of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Our data shows very low numbers of children identified, and almost no overlap between those children and those registered in SERCs. This could be as a result of the current data collection methods (for example, EMIS focus on segregation of school and SERC can lead to confusion and under-reporting); or it could be that teachers simply have no idea - and no incentive - how, or indeed why, to identify children with disabilities in their classes. Our research shows that although teachers are receptive to the idea of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classes, they feel they lack the knowledge and skills to teach children with disabilities. On examination of the approaches to special/inclusive education in the pre-service teacher training curriculum, this perhaps can be attributed to the focus on identification and assessment of impairments in teacher training. Moreover, the curriculum is not standardised, the module is worth few credit points, and tends to focus on assessing the child's medical condition (the 'problem'), rather than the difficulties the child may be having with learning and the measures the teachers can take to alleviate these difficulties, including appropriate referral pathways and support.

Two further significant challenges were identified: how inclusion is understood; and teacher pedagogy. Our findings show that whilst PNG has a huge diversity of learners, current approaches to inclusion tend to focus on disability ('special/inclusive education') rather than the diversity of learners in PNG (ethno-linguistic groups; disadvantaged children; remote and rural children etc.). If the definition of inclusion was widened to encompass this complexity it is likely to facilitate inclusion more broadly.

The second challenge is more complex and has to do with how knowledge is seen as being transmitted, as well as the curriculum used to guide this transmission. Our research suggests that even if teachers have had some training in inclusive/special education, they still perceive the barriers to education as being with the child, not the teacher (or indeed the environment). This may be how learning traditionally happens in PNG but it leads to a deflection of responsibility around learners which is problematic for all children, but especially those who may need additional support. Given current debates around the curriculum and a child centred approach, teachers need to be taught how to work within the current pedagogical system to ensure diverse range of learners can be included. More research is needed on the specific challenges learners with a range of impairments face in the mainstream class - for example, children with hearing impairments.

Recommendations that support the removal of dis-incentives include reviewing the current Special Education Policy and data collection methods; revise current teacher training to develop broader understandings of inclusion and move away from the focus on impairments; improvements to the general inspection process to mainstream inclusion into school-focused assessments; and stronger collaboration and cross sectoral linkages to move away from seeing children with disabilities as primarily the responsibility of the education sector. As our results indicate, the majority of children with disabilities are unlikely to be in the education system and are therefore falling outside current assessment processes. The National Disability Act recommends the establishment of Provincial Disability Coordination Committees, which are crucial, but we suggest taking this a step further, and similar to Gender Focal Points, establish disability focal points in each province who can support the mainstreaming of disability issues across other sectors such as health, community development, etc.

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