



# Reviewing approaches to education services for disabled children in Papua New Guinea

## Policy Brief

### Research objective

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 of PNG (GoPNG) ostensibly supports improved access to inclusive education 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, these have not resulted in inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Special Education Resource Centres (SERCs) are key to the delivery of education to children with disabilities; however, as this research demonstrates numerous challenges remain, and the results of this research point toward some ways in which these challenges can be overcome.

### KEY MESSAGES

- While there are a number of policies and practices in place to support the education of children with disabilities, there are significant dis-incentives to inclusive education that need to be reversed
- There needs to be clearer understanding, and mainstreaming of, inclusive education rather than special education across policy and practice
- Teacher training programmes and practice need to shift away from (or at least acknowledge and accommodate) current learning-centred pedagogy to a child-centred (learner) pedagogy
- There needs to be focal points for disability in each province to develop links across services and sectors

### Reversing the disincentives to inclusion

The research found that despite some very forward looking policies in place to support the education of children with disabilities, these have the unintended consequence of actually dis-incentivising mainstream schools from including children with disabilities in their classes. This is for a number of reasons:

- Policy focus is on SERCs rather than mainstream schools;
- Lack of resources for inclusion and significant under-investment to mainstream schools and SERCs;
- Lack of oversight and management of SERCs (for example SERCs are not included in National Department of Education (NDOE) management structures or plans)
- School preparedness – currently school inspections primarily focus on teachers, but this should be expanded to include access; awareness; safety and security in order to increase school and teacher preparedness to support the delivery of inclusive education in an appropriate and accessible environment; and degree to which parents and children feel confident to access education in appropriate and accessible environments. More research is needed on this, particularly around who are least safe and most excluded.
- Data collection - for example, EMIS focus on segregation of school and SERC can lead to confusion and under-reporting. Moreover, there is no experience of disaggregating the data to identify the individual needs of the child at school level.

Therefore the GoPNG needs to review the current National Special Education Policy and Plan to revise the context using a collaborative and consultative process; develop an action plan; allocate resources; and instigate regular reviews with accountability mechanisms. This should be in line with existing

commitments to international human rights frameworks.

## Shift emphasis to inclusion rather than special education across education policy and practice

The research found that current methods of teacher training also (unintentionally) perpetuate the disincentives to inclusion. Teachers are overwhelmingly positive to the idea of the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classes, but rarely experience it in practice. Therefore in order to give all education stakeholders a clearer understanding of what inclusion is, the following recommendations are made:

- Harmonise and standardise how the education of children with disabilities is included across the pre-service teacher training curricula;
- Mainstream inclusive education across pre-service curricula so that teachers understand how to manage an inclusive classroom;
- Include updates on inclusive education via in-service training days;
- Improve specialist teacher training (in-service) and ensure all SERC teachers have a qualification in Special Education (e.g. diploma or equivalent), as per policy. Increase number of credit points for specialist teacher training (as an optional career pathway).

## Teacher training programmes and practice need to shift away from current 'learning-centred' pedagogy to a child (learner)-centred pedagogy

Despite their overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, the 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). Whilst this is possibly how learning happens in PNG (Guthrie, 2012, Hahambu et al, 2012), it leads to a deflection of responsibility around learners. But huge diversity is already the norm in classes across PNG. However, within the education system, there are compartmentalised approaches to diversity – instead of inclusive approaches. While there needs to be a shift to a child-centred approach, this will likely take time, so in the interim, teachers need to be taught how to work within the current pedagogical system to ensure a diverse range of learners are included. Suggestions as to how this may be done include:

- Make the definition of inclusion culturally – and nationally – relevant to include the diversity of learners in PNG;

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**This document is an output from research funded by DFAT. The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of DFAT or the Australian Government.**

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## METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in three schools and one SERC in one province from the four regions of PNG. In total, data was collected from 12 primary schools, four Special Education Resource Centres (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 from the National Department of Education and primary teacher training colleges).

- Mainstream teachers need to be able to *identify difficulties*, rather than *assess impairments*, and understand the processes of referral (e.g. to a SERC). This should entail a shift away from the current focus on the condition, rather than the difficulties with learning that the child may have.

## Provide focal points for disability in each province to develop links across services

There needs to be greater collaboration and cross sectoral linkages in order to move away from the onus on the education sector taking most of the responsibility for children with disabilities. As our results indicate, the majority of children with disabilities are unlikely to actually be in the education system to be formally assessed in the first place. The National Disability Act suggests having Provincial Disability Committees, but we suggest taking this a step further and having Disability Focal Points in each province who can help mainstream disability issues across sectors including health, early child development/education; community development etc. This would support earlier identification and assessment of children with disabilities, as well as earlier intervention and support. This would need resourcing, but is in line with the National Disability Policy.

## References

- Guthrie, (2012), The Failure of progressive classroom reform: Lessons from the Curriculum Reform Implementation Project in Papua New Guinea, Australian Journal of Education; Vol.56, Issue 3
- Hahambu et al, (2012), Elementary Teacher Education in Papua New Guinea: Towards a culturally connected perspective of teaching, Australian Journal of Education, Vol 37, Issue 4