

VESP View

VANUATU EDUCATION SUPPORT PROGRAM

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Issue 6: Schools promoting Inclusive Education



One of the key long-term goals of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) is to provide more equitable access to education.

In 2011 MoET developed an Inclusive Education Policy, which describes inclusive education as being “accessible education” within regular local neighbourhood or community schools. This requires teachers, schools and systems to better accommodate the diversity of pupils’ needs.

Since 2016, the Ministry, through VESP, has been conducting a small scale case study of school-based initiatives aimed at raising awareness of how schools and their communities can improve education access for children. The program currently supports three rural schools (Ekipe, Fokona and Matarisu) in their efforts to promote participation and learning for girls and boys, disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities and out-of-school children. With help from the MoET/VESP inclusive education team, school leaders, staff and communities have undertaken capacity development to take the lead in making their schools more inclusive. The approach focuses on building collaboration between the school, its committee, its staff and the local community.

Each school identified the barriers that may be preventing children from attending their school and developed plans to reach out to their communities and address some of these barriers. The progress of their plan is being documented so that they can share their experiences and lessons learned with other schools.

The activities undertaken so far show that they are all engaged energetically in making changes at their respective schools by improving support for marginalised children, raising awareness within the communities and increasing engagement among teachers and students.



Fokona School: involving students in community outreach

As part of Fokona School’s inclusion strategy in 2017, the school Principal organised outreach activities involving his Year 5 students in a door-to-door campaign to meet parents in the school catchment area. Beyond identifying children not attending school, the team raised awareness on the importance of right age enrolment for the children no matter their disabilities. The cultural barriers were overcome by explaining to the parents that they shouldn’t feel “ashamed” and keep their children at home. Two children with dyslexia and one child with speech impairments have started Year 1 this year.

The Principal also identified that financial challenges for some parents prevented their children from going to school. He developed a manageable and regular payment plan to assist them, resulting in more children attending school on a regular basis. A grandmother with tearful eyes stated, “I couldn’t afford to pay for my two grandchildren’s school fees after their mother left them behind with me. But thanks to the payment plan, I can use my road market earnings to pay for my grandchildren’s fees little by little”. The Principal is keeping a photo journal of the school’s participation in the Inclusion Case Study as a tool for students, parents and the wider school community to reflect on their ongoing progress.

Ekipe School: breaking down barriers

The Ekipe School community decided to address education access barriers by implementing three main initiatives.

First, they introduced inclusive education awareness sessions for the teachers and the committee to increase their understanding and recruit them as ambassadors within the communities. A census of the children who are not enrolled was conducted and the parents of children with special needs came forward to enrol their children for the new 2018 academic year. For example, a child with vision impairment was enrolled at their kindy school this year. This type of disability is no longer seen as a barrier to stop parents from sending their children to school.

The highly motivated team then created a canteen that offers a school lunch meal to the students, encouraging healthy nutrition and reducing afternoon absenteeism.

Finally the school looked at how they could reduce the challenges of distance for children attending school. The school has organised transport for students who used to walk one hour twice a day to attend school. This initiative increased children’s attendance, reduced lateness in the morning and improved the overall concentration of the students. It has positively impacted on access to education for the distant communities.

Matarisu School, a community effort to make children ready for school

For the past year, the teachers and school committee members have reached out to the communities around Matarisu school, increasing enrolment from 39 to 67 over a period of six months.

The school's outreach focussed on raising awareness about the importance of right age enrolment. Following a successful open day at the end of 2017 for parents and children, the School launched its "Summer School" program to help those children who would be starting school but had not attended kindergarten. Fifteen excited kids, who were already enrolled to start Year 1, joined the program in January to participate in activities that would help them transition from being at home to starting school. Ideally children should have a year of pre-school before starting school but it is not compulsory so this really helps close the "readiness gap" on day one of school for these children. A teacher explained its benefits, "The parents have noticed that their children are already more independent and more comfortable in expressing themselves."

During the "Summer School" program, the resourceful Matarisu team agreed that the children living long distances away from the school could sleep in the school premises. Committed teachers volunteered to look after the students, while the community provided food every week and assigned another woman to help take care of the students on a daily basis. Lucy Sandy, one of the teachers, explained "the students are with their friends in a learning environment from Sunday night to Friday. They love the solution. They are not tired anymore after the long day. Their brain is more receptive in the classroom." Following this success, the Chairman of Matarisu School announced that the children are welcome to sleep at the school when needed. Through an awareness program the school has worked with parents and staff to implement measures that ensure that the children are safeguarded at all times.

These initiatives are a genuine community effort to promote children's education rights by reducing access barriers and improving learning conditions.

"The Government is supporting us by continuing to subsidise the tuition fees for Years 1 to 6 and extending them to include preschool, years 7 and 8. The road leading our kids to school used to be a wild bush path. The Government started to clean the road slowly with a bush knife over the last few years; but now the road to go to Kindergarten up to Year 8 is a smooth cemented road! We don't have any reason to keep our children at home anymore", Thomas Sandy, Chairman of Matarisu School

Open Days encourage enrolment of 6 year old children into Year 1

At the end of 2017, the principals and the teachers of the three schools ramped up their efforts and organised a full day event for children, parents and teachers. It was a first for Vanuatu education that MoET, along with VESP and the school management teams, joined hands in an awareness campaign in anticipation of the next academic year.

Each school event was different but they were all marked by inspiring speeches such as the one from Kalo Obed Toara, Ekipe School Principal, who stated "Today we are together here for our kids, to encourage them to take part in some transition activities so they can be ready to start Year 1. I believe that plenty of kids are not coming to school yet as they should. It is very important that we, as parents, look after our children. All the 6 year old kids should go to Year 1, including the children with disabilities. We need to give them a bright future and that's what the school and the education will offer them."

The children enjoyed a day full of activities such as morning kindergarten lessons and songs, their first Year 1 experience with their future teachers, lunch with all the students and many competitions. The prizes included school uniforms, bags, water bottles and thongs to make sure that they started getting ready for school.

The initiative successfully managed to attract children who should enter Year 1 in the next academic year and were not enrolled in Kindergarten, including enthusiastic kids with special needs.

"Before he didn't like going to school. Now, he doesn't feel ashamed anymore. He has his own school bag and his uniform, just like his friends", Alexine, Mother of a 6 year old boy

Where to next?

VESP will continue to help the Ministry to monitor, document and analyse the learnings from the case study. Later in the year these will be the basis of discussions about how MoET can support Inclusive Education Policy implementation more effectively across all the schools in Vanuatu.



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