

Working *with*, not *against*, educational realities: the key to sustainable and authentic inclusive education



Research indicates that the introduction of a new ‘inclusive’ national curriculum has not significantly changed teaching and learning practices in remote rural schools in PNG. Disabled children also remain excluded from schools.

In 2004, the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) introduced a new ‘inclusive’ curriculum “designed to meet the needs of all students” (NDOE, 2002, p. 25). The research presented here found that, although the teachers’ practice had changed in some ways since the introduction of the curriculum, they had not adopted many of the ‘student-centred’ teaching and learning precepts prescribed in curriculum documents. The findings from PNG are relevant to other countries introducing more inclusive or learner-centred curricula.

Variables shaping the teachers’ practice

Non-implementation of the curriculum can be partly attributed to the gap between the technical demands of the curriculum and the capacity of the teachers to meet those demands—for instance, due to lack of in-service training and access to resources. It can also be attributed to culturally-embedded teacher resistance to the facilitative roles they were expected to play in the classroom by the curriculum (Guthrie, 2003) and to teacher scepticism about the validity of constructivist theories of learning.

Unorthodox inclusion in the case-study schools

Although the teachers ignored many of the curriculum’s precepts, some of them had developed their own contextually-appropriate approaches for promoting student learning. However, many of these approaches assumed teachers should centrally control teaching and learning and were hence contrary to the spirit, as well as the letter, of the new curriculum.

Non-enrolment of disabled children in the schools

No disabled children were visible in the schools. This can be attributed to various factors, including high school fees, negative social attitudes, and lack of investment in support services for students with impairments. Other marginalised groups (such as girls) were also under-represented or unrepresented in the schools. This shows that ‘inclusive’ curricula need to be combined with additional, contextually-appropriate measures.

Why focus on education quality?

Governments and international donors aim to make primary education accessible to all children by 2015. But children and young people’s learning needs will only be met once they are in school if the quality of education is also improved. Education quality is key to attracting and retaining learners in basic education and ensuring education benefits individuals and society.

Key Policy Messages

Policymakers should work *with* rather than *against* educational realities to promote sustainable and authentic inclusive education.

New curricula should therefore be both contextually-responsive and supported with appropriate measures.

This means governments and development agencies need to be:

- **Enquiring organisations, so they can discover these realities;**
- **Open-minded organisations, so they can respond to these realities;**
- **Collaborative organisations, so they can work with local stakeholders to change these realities when this is necessary.**

Research findings at a glance

- Some changes in teaching and learning were evident in the schools.
- Many of the new curriculum’s precepts had not been adopted by the teachers. This was due to the teachers’ inability and unwillingness to implement the curriculum.
- Some of the teachers had developed their own contextually-appropriate strategies for inclusion. However these strategies were not acknowledged in curriculum documents.
- No disabled children were visible in the schools, a consequence of various factors.
- Other marginalised groups in PNG were also unrepresented or under-represented in the schools. For instance, boys outnumbered girls by two to one in the Grade 8 classes.

Background to the research: the new ‘inclusive’ curriculum in PNG

From 2004, a new ‘inclusive’ national curriculum was introduced in schools in PNG. The curriculum was developed and facilitated by the National Department of Education (NDOE), assisted by the Curriculum Reform Implementation Project (CRIP), a multi-million dollar project funded by a bilateral development agency and employing national and expatriate consultants.

Four patterns of teaching and learning are prescribed in the curriculum documents:

1. The *democratisation* of teaching and learning: education programmes should meet the shared needs of students;
2. The *differentiation* of teaching and learning: education programmes should meet the diverse needs of students;
3. The *socialisation* of teaching and learning: education should be a social process embedded in broader social processes—for instance, collaborative learning should be encouraged in the classroom, and local stakeholders involved in curriculum planning;
4. The *systematisation* of teaching and learning: education programmes should be meticulously organised so they meet the shared and diverse needs of students.

These prescribed patterns of teaching and learning are radically different from the ‘formalistic’ patterns traditionally prevalent in schools in PNG (Guthrie, 2003; Monemone, 2003).

Governments and development agencies have similarly attempted to transform teaching and learning through curriculum reform in other ‘developing’ countries. However, they have often encountered difficulties—either because they have demanded too much from fragile education systems and/or because the reforms are incompatible with traditional, culturally-embedded beliefs and practices (Carney, 2008; Clarke, 2003; Guthrie, 1990; Stephens, 2007).

This research in PNG assessed the impact of the new curriculum on teaching and learning practices in remote rural schools and identified the factors that enabled/inhibited the implementation of the curriculum. It was believed that this information would be useful for policymakers in PNG and elsewhere.

The research also identified the various forces and influences shaping the curriculum, in order to assess to what extent it was “home grown”, as claimed by the Minister for Education (Laimo, 2006, p. 1), and to what extent it was shaped by Western educational theory and practice.

Prescribed curriculum practice versus actual curriculum practice

The new curriculum identifies various ‘inclusive’ precepts that teachers should follow. However, teachers in this research were often unable/unwilling to follow these precepts and therefore employed alternative practices. Some examples of this are described below.

The challenge of thematic teaching and learning

Teachers are required to integrate subjects as “this is more likely to provide a meaningful and natural environment for students” (NDOE, 2004, p. 2).

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However, the teachers claimed that they found it conceptually difficult to synthesise the different ‘learning areas’ of the curriculum. They also claimed their teaching was more focused and intelligible when they taught subjects separately. Similar reservations about the feasibility and efficacy of integrated teaching and learning have been expressed by Bernstein (1971) and Kysilka (1998).

The challenge of autonomous learning

Teachers are also required to provide students with opportunities to “take charge of their own learning” (NDOE, 2003, p. 11), as it is believed that this too will make learning more meaningful for students.

However, the teachers pointed out that it was very difficult to provide their students with these opportunities given the lack of learning resources in their schools, particularly print materials. Consequently, the teachers tended to give their students the same tasks and to tightly control the learning process.

The challenge of peer-tutoring

The new curriculum recommends that students support one another through peer-tutoring (NDOE, 2004).

Although the teachers encouraged their students to help one another in this way, lesson-observation indicated that peer-tutoring generally took the form of answer-sharing, as opposed to the explanation and demonstration of problem-solving processes.

This was because peer-tutoring is a complex skill, and the students had not been provided with the necessary training in this task. Consequently, students were highly reliant on the remedial support provided by teachers as they patrolled the classroom.

The challenge of multi-modal assessment

The new curriculum also expects teachers to expertly deploy a variety of assessment instruments to identify the learning characteristics of students and thus to provide them with appropriate support and stimulation. Recommended instruments include: ‘class grids’, ‘anecdotal records’, ‘student portfolios’, ‘self and peer reflective records’, ‘observation class lists’, ‘demonstrated achievement checklists’, ‘incidence charts’, ‘Likert scales’, ‘sentence completions’, and tests which can be ‘standardised’, ‘objective’, or ‘free response’.

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However, the teachers claimed that they lacked the time, energy, and expertise to use many of these instruments. They therefore tended to rely on ‘tried and tested methods’, even though those gave them a very incomplete picture of their students’ learning characteristics.

Conclusion

The research shows that teachers are only able to employ unfamiliar, complex, and sometimes resource-intensive strategies if they are provided with appropriate support. By contrast, locally-developed methods may sometimes be more feasible and effective.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- When developing curricula, policymakers should take into account existing conditions in schools and the existing skill-sets and knowledge-bases of teachers.
- Teachers should be provided with support and resources that will enable them to implement challenging new initiatives.
- Policymakers should not uncritically incorporate progressive ‘Western’ educational practices within curricula.

The positive effects of the new curriculum on teaching and learning

Celebrating traditional culture

Despite implementation difficulties, the curriculum was having a positive impact on teaching and learning in many respects. In the picture below, students are learning a traditional dance. The teacher told the researcher that this activity encouraged her students to take pride in their Melanesian culture. She also believed it built social cohesion among her students. Furthermore, she pointed out that activities like this reduced the very strong emphasis in PNG schools on desk-based learning.



Celebrating village skills

In the same school, students were told to improve the school environment using a local skill. Teachers believed that this activity would be meaningful and relevant for students, and validate their village-based skills and knowledge. The boy in the picture has nearly finished constructing a bench with tools he has brought from home. He told the researcher: “*Mi hamamas long wok blong mi*”. Translated from *Tok Pisin*, this means: “I’m proud of what I’ve done”. His efforts were certainly appreciated by his peers.

Unorthodox inclusion in the schools

Although the teachers did not adopt many of the ‘inclusive’ precepts of the new curriculum, they had developed their own situationally-appropriate ways of promoting ‘learning for all’.

This was particularly evident in the field of communication, where the teachers expertly used a variety of strategies to transmit skills and knowledge to their mixed ability classes.

These strategies included:

- Speaking in short, simple sentences.
- Providing examples relevant to the students’ own experiences.
- Providing concise definitions.
- Using visual aids.
- Scrutinising the expressions on the children’s faces in order to check for understanding.

The teachers also tended to show great respect towards their students, an essential approach in a ‘shame-based’ society such as PNG’s.

The teacher-dominance of the communication processes in the schools may seem antithetical to inclusion—and at times it was problematic. However, it was often essential due to the lack of learning materials in the schools: consequently information had to be transmitted directly to the students by the teachers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy-makers should acknowledge the situated expertise of teachers. ‘Internationally-accepted’ practice is not necessarily appropriate in certain development contexts.

Non-enrolment of disabled children in the schools

No disabled students were visible in the case-study schools. Conversations with teachers, parents, community-members, and disabled children themselves indicated that this was a result of the interaction of various factors.

These included prohibitively high school fees and the unlikelihood of disabled students obtaining formal employment after graduation, as it was believed by many stakeholders that only the strong possibility of future employment would make investment in disabled children’s education ‘worthwhile’. Negative opinions about the ‘educability’ of these children were also expressed.

Furthermore, it was discovered that staff from the local Special Education Resource Centre (SERC) had been unable to regularly visit the schools because of shortfalls in its budget, a reflection of lack of investment in these organisations by the government.

As the primary role of these organisations is the promotion of inclusive education, the non-presence of the SERC in the schools and their surrounding communities was highly significant.

For instance, the staff of the SERC could have raised awareness about the rights of these children and provided the early intervention and community-based rehabilitation which would have increased the ‘school readiness’ of these children. They could also have supported the teachers and students in the classroom.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum reform alone cannot promote inclusive education for disabled children. Multi-faceted initiatives are essential. However, these must be sensitive to local realities.

About the Research

The research was a qualitative, multi-contextual case-study informed by an interpretivist methodology.

The fieldwork component of the research was carried out in three primary schools in the Eastern Highlands of PNG between 2008 and 2009. This involved lesson observation, interviews with the teachers, and conversations with other stakeholders. The case-study findings were then placed in broader national contexts.

After this, the processes of formulation for the new curriculum were examined. This aspect of the research involved analysis of the long-running curriculum conversations in the country, as well as analysis of the processes of production of the national curriculum documents. This 'process-tracing' was combined with 'inter-textual' analysis—i.e. examination of the similarities and differences between national curriculum documents and Western educational documents.

The research not only drew upon fieldwork and document analysis, but the researcher's six years' experience in PNG, in which he worked as a lecturer in special and inclusive education at the University of Goroka in the Eastern Highlands.

Further Reading

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