



BELIZE

Caribbean Symposium on Inclusive Education

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BELIZE REPORT ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Introduction

Belize is a small democratic country of approximately -----square miles with a sparsely distributed population of about 300,000 of which slightly more than half reside in urban areas. Though physically located in Central America, Belize shares strong cultural and economic ties with the English speaking countries of the Caribbean. English is the official language of communication in Belize although ¹Creole and Spanish are widely spoken. Belize's population is a multi-ethnic mix of ²Mestizo, Creole, ³Garinagu, Yucatec and Q'eqchi Maya, East Indian and small numbers of Mennonite, Asian and European immigrants.

Belize's economy is reliant on agricultural products such as banana, citrus and sugar cane. Marine products also account for a large share of the country's revenue, while tourism has rapidly emerged as one of Belize's chief foreign exchange earners. Over the last decade Belize has faced economic challenges much like most developing countries grappling with a growing population in the face of declining preferential markets and low production rates. Despite the many challenges, substantial progress in social conditions has been achieved over the last decade.

Education continues to be a priority for the Government of Belize, commanding the second largest portion of total public recurrent spending over the last decade. Although the largest portion of the education budget is committed to payment of teachers' salaries, access to education has steadily increased at all levels of the education sector as new classrooms are added every year. Within the last decade access to basic education has increased to a significant 90% of the primary age cohort.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

A key feature of Belize's education system is the partnership between different religious denominations and the government in the delivery of primary and secondary education through grant-aided schools. The Government establishes educational objectives, pays teacher salaries, shares the cost of facilities and maintenance, develops curricula and standards, provides teacher training and administers national examinations.

¹ Creole – local dialect comprised of a derivation of English with some African words and grammar

² Mestizo – descendants of those who fled the Caste War in Yucatan in the mid 1800s.

³ Garinagu – a mixture of Carib Indian and African slaves

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Belize's education system consists of two years of pre-school (optional), eight years of primary and four years of secondary education. At the primary and secondary levels, education is offered by Government owned schools, denominational grant-aided schools, community grant-aided schools and private schools. Grant funding to government assisted primary schools include full payment of teachers' salaries, operational and maintenance grants. Secondary grant-aided schools receive 70% of teachers' salaries paid by public funds and additional financial support for construction and maintenance of buildings. Compulsory schooling is 5-14 years which covers the primary level of education.

Although the transition rate to secondary is ⁴reported as approximately 80% of the children completing primary level in any given year, movement to secondary is not automatic as there are still not enough spaces at secondary to allow universal access. Belize is rapidly moving towards this goal however hence it is anticipated that universal access to secondary will be achieved by the year 2010. To ensure that this goal is met, the government of Belize is in the process of constructing new secondary schools in rural communities particularly where lack of transportation is a major contributing factor to children being prevented from moving on to secondary school.

Post-secondary education includes Junior College/ Sixth Form and or University either locally or abroad. At completion of Junior College, successful students are awarded an Associate Degree which allows matriculation to University level. A review of enrollment data at the secondary and post secondary level will show a significant decrease in the number of males enrolled in institutions providing higher education compared to female enrollment. This is a phenomenon that calls for further investigation and necessary action in order to ensure that every effort can be made to eliminate those mitigating factors that may be contribute to increasing loss of male students at higher levels of the education system.

Sources of Exclusion

Over the last decade the Ministry of Education has done significant work in identifying and seeking to eliminate, or reduce the effects of those factors that contribute to children being excluded from acquiring a basic education. Such factors include all those that place children at a disadvantage such as, physical disabilities, learning deficiencies, effects of HIV and Aids on families and children, illness, social and cultural differences and any form of discrimination.

In Belize inclusion or inclusive education is often used restrictively to refer to provisions for children with special needs due to some physical disability. However, although other disadvantaged groups are often not considered when referring to inclusive

⁴ Education Statistics published by Department of Education , Ministry of Labour, Education and Culture

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education, international conventions and protocols to which Belize is a signatory - such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child - has contributed to a heightened awareness of the need to ensure that no child is excluded from acquiring a basic education. The MDGs and EFA targets also contribute to creating a greater sense of urgency and commitment towards ensuring that schools seek to foster enabling environments in which children can be supported to achieve the best that they can both academically and socially.

Public Policies

Although the area of special education has undoubtedly received by far the most attention in Belize's efforts to eliminate sources of exclusion for children, legislation supports a more comprehensive view of inclusion. The Education Rules signed into law in 2000 states clearly as follows in Section 2 Rule 168 section 1-3:

168. (1) No citizen or permanent resident of Belize shall be refused admission to any school on account of race, ethnicity, language, political affiliation, region of the country of origin, special needs or because of perceived social and economic status.

168. (2) No citizen or permanent resident of Belize shall be refused admission to any school on account of religion.

168. (3) No person shall be refused admission to any school on account of gender, except where such schools were originally established as non-coeducational.

The Cabinet also endorsed the policies advocated by the following:

- Framework for Action for Persons with Disabilities
- Families and Children's Act
- National Plan of Action (for children and families)
- Education Action Plan

Each of the above seek to address those contributing factors that prevent children and their families from living full and productive lives where access to education is a right and not a privilege. The Education Action Plan, developed from feedback obtained through a series of national consultation, identified key action areas targeting access, equity and quality. Early childhood education, teacher education and training, TVET and Curriculum development were four areas that stood out as priority areas for development.

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Within the education sector other direct interventions have been undertaken to provide additional support for at risk children. These include:

- Legalizing the HFLE policy and implementing the HFLE Curriculum inclusive of training of teachers to deliver the HFLE curriculum
- Significant investment in the TVET sub-sector to facilitate increased training opportunities and alternative educational opportunities catering to a wider cross-section of learners with a wide range of abilities
- Adoption of intercultural bilingual education strategies in three pilot schools in indigenous communities as an initial effort to encourage schools to develop school curriculum sensitive to the environment from which the children come
- Establishment of a school community liaison unit where officers interact directly with families and law enforcement personnel to prevent truancy and early drop-out from primary schools
- Introduction of Government of Belize Textbook Programme which provides standardized, quality textbooks free of cost to primary school children in five core areas of the curriculum.
- Increased access to early childhood education for children from lower income families with GOB heavily subsidizing the construction of preschool classrooms countrywide and meeting the salaries of preschool teachers to guarantee reduction of fees for parents of children attending public preschools

Towards a More Enabling Environment

Although a fair number of meaningful interventions are already operational within the education system, there are yet too many children not able to enjoy the benefits of having obtained a good quality education. Interventions are still too much centred on the masses rather than the individualized approach where each child is important. Invariably some children fall so far behind they are forced by age and social environment to exit the education system prematurely.

As partners in education the churches, parents and the community seek to coordinate efforts and collaborate in order to provide a strong support system within which schools can operate efficiently and effectively. Often where the most support is required the least is provided therefore the linkages that are forged with the community serve the education sector well in most instances. Such linkages include, NGOs, the business community, agencies and cooperating Universities external to Belize. As indicated earlier, special education has benefited over the years from much attention by way of finding the ways in which children with disabilities could benefit from a meaningful education that would enable them to lead successful adult lives in their communities. A

closer look at Special Education Services in Belize will help to measure the progress made towards inclusion of children with disabilities in the education system.

Developments in Special Education

There is no question that the provision of special education services in Belize has changed since the inception of the Special Education Unit (SEU) in 1991. Sixteen years ago, when the SEU opened its doors, the ideas that were presented were a reflection of the values and beliefs about the education of students with special needs. The prevailing mode of operation was that of a "lone ranger" strategy to service provision for such students. Special Education was seen like an appendage, a part of the educational system but apart from the main. As such, it was evolving into a second system with its own set of teachers, administrators, programmes and budget. At the same time, to a large extent it developed a sense of independence and autonomy, a penchant for doing things unilaterally even when issues and problems seem to demand bilateral action.

That era saw the establishment of special schools and centers, the specialized training of teachers, the merger of the Lynn School for students with intellectual impairments with Stella Maris School for students with other forms of disabilities, and of course the establishment of the SEU, among other things and events. Very few would argue that these were not positive steps in the development of Special Education in Belize. These were the things that highlighted the provision of educational services to students with SEN. However as the demand for services began to increase and simultaneously with the international call for reform in education and more specifically in the provision of education for students with SEN, the Special Education Unit had to reflect on its practices and mend itself of its organizational, physical and psychological separation from the source of its problems – general education.

Whereas many educators may reject all or part of this "second system" analysis, there is growing recognition that a meaningful connection with the general education system is necessary and that the "lone ranger" strategy for special education is self defeating. Growing evidence was indicating that students with special needs and their teachers are served much better when special education provision is coordinated closely with other departments of the MOE. Therefore as the work of the Special Education Unit continued to expand to include students with physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional-behavioral and developmental needs, it was more and more evident that we needed to embrace the principles and philosophy of Inclusive education in order that the needs of all students could be met and not just the limited few that were deemed to have exceptional learning needs.

Given this reality the Special Education Unit underwent fundamental changes in its outlook on the provision of educational services to students with special needs. This transformation has led to the birth of the concept of, the National Resource Centre for

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Inclusive Education (NaRCIE). The NaRCIE, established in June 2007, remains the department of the Ministry of Education which is responsible for ensuring that the special learning needs of students are properly addressed within the existing education system. This task demands that the NaRCIE collaborates with other entities to consolidate the principle of inclusive education in the education system. This is a tremendous task which hinges on redefinition of the structure of the Special Education Unit its, policies and outlook. In so doing, it is envisioned that all clients will be positively impacted through the day-to-day activities of the Centre.

Although the current emphasis is on promoting inclusion, given the high accompanying cost financially and otherwise , it is fully recognized that some special-school/class placement is still required as this may prove to be the most enabling environment for students with moderate to severe special needs. The NaRCIE seeks to institute programmes which will strengthen our ability to address the needs of the growing number of students with varying learning needs in our pre-, primary and secondary schools. NaRCIE continues to provide technical and professional support to the two special schools and six centers as well as to several regular schools.

The educational assessment and screening of students continues to be the bedrock for making decisions about a student's school life. With its new and larger conference room, the NaRCIE is able to facilitate more teachers who seek further information about inclusive education practices. Teachers will be provided with the opportunities to expand their pedagogic repertoire through teacher training sessions which will be provided by NaRCIE. In an effort to bridge the gap between students potential and academic performance (often the case of students with Learning Disability), NaRCIE is presently piloting the provision of direct intervention to a few students who have been assessed and found to require an intensive programme in order for them to be able to catch up to age-expected academic performance.

In the very near future, the NaRCIE will provide speech and language intervention for students with language and communication problems. This is an area of immense need. The office is already flooded with request for this service. The room is already available and awaits its first speech and language therapist or pathologist. It is also becoming more evident that there is a need for combined educational assessment and psychological assessment. The initial stages of developing a programme for psychological assessment and intervention are therefore, currently in progress.

The NaRCIE promotes family and community support through providing accommodation for the Parents Association of Children with Special Needs (PACSN) to meet on a monthly basis as well as providing training as needed. NaRCIE will continue to concentrate its efforts on drawing on the talents and energies of our special educators and other professionals working with general educators to fashion a smarter, more supple, coordinated school program responsive to fast and slow learners alike. According to this view, only when all teachers and others in the education community

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are working together will our education system become sufficiently competent and confident to include all those students who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion.

NaRCIE will work hard to interest general educators in special education concerns and practices. Many positive efforts have been made towards this end and many officers of the MOE have wholeheartedly embraced the philosophy of inclusive education. As a result, together we have accomplished much. It is such collaboration and support that accounts for our participation in the Meso-American Project for Inclusion since 2000; the institutional strengthening of the SEU leading to its transformation into the NaRCIE; the approval of special arrangements for national and international examinations; a better appreciation for the rights of all students; the growing sensitivity of the general public to our diversified society and growing collaboration with more partners in education.

Creating an Enabling Environment for Learners and Teachers

With the NaRCIE well on its way to establishing systems that can readily serve the needs of children with disabilities more effort need to be concentrated on sensitizing the education community to the knowledge that inclusive education is not restricted to special education but speaks to all the needs of all the marginalized and excluded children. Teacher education must play a key role in ensuring that teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to transform classrooms into learner friendly spaces where every child is able to receive the care and attention needed to reach their full potential.

Over the last few years teacher training in Belize has witnessed a paradigm shift with greater emphasis being placed on attracting pre-service teachers who are perceived as being more flexible and open to innovation rather than trapped in the traditional ways of doing things. The teacher training curriculum is currently being reviewed to reflect those elements needed to develop a strong sensitive teacher able to manage a diverse group of learners using differentiated instruction in a child friendly atmosphere - a teacher who will be able to effectively manage the new demands that will emerge with achievement of universal access to secondary education.

Alongside the emphasis on teacher training must come the realization that support systems must be put in place to assist teachers in managing some of the new challenges they are now faced with. Teachers must now learn to cope with children with HIV and AIDS, diverse learning needs, physical and psychological handicaps, highly negative social circumstances and a host of other challenges. Only with strong support from the community, parents, the Ministry of Education and all stakeholders will teachers be able to remain efficient and effective in the modern classroom where inclusion is the overarching philosophy.

Conclusion:

In the 21st Century where the creation of knowledge based societies is key to survival there is a greater need for quality education. In the knowledge-based society the approach to teaching requires learners to be able to constantly revise knowledge in collaborative settings; however, this approach to learning is relatively difficult for teachers to manage. Current research shows that the quality of teaching is the input that accounts for the greatest variation in the performance of students. Teacher input has a greater influence than class size, resources or the socio-cultural background of students. It is now clear that the more preparation people have before entering teaching, the longer they stay in the profession. This means that money spent in quality teacher education is a good long-term investment. Teachers need both strong content knowledge and strong pedagogical knowledge if they are to teach for understanding and diversity

In seeking to bring about full inclusion it is critical that quality is maintained in the process, quality in teacher education and training as well as quality in teaching. It would indeed be unfortunate that as we arrive at our goals of eliminating the sources of exclusion we exclude children within the school system from enjoying a meaningful learning experience. It is therefore fair to conclude that a prepared teaching force is central to the successful achievement of inclusion for all children.