

Compulsory education needed

PORT MORESBY ---- The single and main barrier preventing Papua New Guinea from achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) is the poor retention of girls and boys in school.

Getting access to an elementary or a primary school is not a major problem anymore. Most children of school age have access to a school. Only a small minority may as yet not be able to be within walking distance of a school.

The main problem now is to retain those who enter the first grade to stay in school and complete the full primary school cycle. About 50 per cent or half the number of children who enter the first grade, whether this be elementary prep or Grade 1, are dropping out of school.

In the Highland provinces, the situation is worse with more than 60 per cent of the children dropping out before the final grade.

The proportion of girls dropping out is slightly more than boys but the poor retention of both sexes is of great concern.

Many people incorrectly use the term “dropout” to identify those who have completed the final grade of primary school but who are unable to get a place in the next level of education.

They are primary school leavers and not dropouts. Dropouts are those who have left school for a variety of reasons before completing the final grade of primary school. The table above constructed from the PNG Education Department education enrolment statistics show the nature of this problem.

In 1996, 55,264 girls enrolled in Grade 1. In 1997, only 47,092 girls from that group were in Grade 2 and 8172 had dropped out. In 1998, 42,032 girls were Grade 3 while 5352 girls had dropped out.

In 2000, when the group got to Grade 5, there were 35,404 girls from that group left. A total of 19,860 girls had dropped between grades one and five. This represents 36 per cent of those who started. But many more will have dropped out before reaching Grade 6 or Grade 8 of primary school.

This is more evident in many of our rural schools. Usually, there are about 40 children starting Grade 1. The following year, when this class moves to Grade 2 there may be only 32 children in the class. When they move to Grade 3, the group might be reduced to 30 children, 28 in Grade 4 and 24 in Grade 5. When they reach Grade 6 there may be only 20 children in the class.

Universal Primary Education (UPE) is reached when all the children of primary school age are in school at any one time. This is measured as an enrolment rate or the percentage of school age children in school. When there is an enrolment rate of 100 per cent or close to it, then we can truly say PNG has achieved UPE.

The official school age is six years on entry to elementary prep and aged 14 when they complete school. However, we know that many of the children in school are often less than six years and more than 14 plus. We therefore use the term Gross Enrolment Ratio, instead to monitor progress.

In 2000, the Gross Enrolment Ratio was about 79 per cent. The 2000 National Census Data indicates where the actual age data was collected, that only 41 per cent of the school-age population was in school. The Gross Enrolment Ratio is estimated to be 78 per cent but this may be grossly over-estimated as accurate education statistics are not available.

There are significant increases in the number of children now going to school. However, this may be as a result of children staying on longer in school - now nine years instead of six years.

The gains are also eroded by the high population growth estimated to be increasing at an annual rate of more than 2.7 per cent. If there is a 2 per cent increase in enrolments from the previous year, then there is

really no progress made.

It is like filling a leaking bucket and unless the leak is fixed, PNG will not achieve UPE. And if close to half of the children continue to drop out before completing the final grade, then in 10 years time, half the population of PNG will still be illiterate.

Not only is dropping out a barrier to achieving UPE, it results in the poor utilisation of scarce resources. A normal class for one teacher would be 40 children but due to dropping out, they are teaching fewer and fewer children as the class progresses through the grades.

Teacher salaries take up a huge share of the national budget and about 60 per cent of provincial budgets. If a class teacher is teaching only 20 children when there is the potential to have 40 more children in the class, there is clearly an under utilisation of a valuable resources.

There are many factors that contribute to a child dropping out of school.

Some are factors relating to the home and the community, others are found within the school and thirdly, those affecting the individual child and the child's perception of the surrounding world.

The Education Department recognised this problem in the 1980s. One of the major factors then claimed to be contributing to the high dropout rate was poor teaching and lack of adequate materials. The second primary-education project funded by the World Bank focused on producing adequate textbooks for teachers and students.

Other initiatives in improving teaching and learning were implemented.

However, they did not seem to have much effect and the high dropout rates continued to strangle PNG's efforts to universalise primary education.

In the 1990s, when the education reforms were being considered and debated, improving retention was at the core of the many initiatives proposed and now being implemented.

It was argued children were leaving because they were being introduced to concepts in a foreign language. If children were introduced to reading and writing in a language they were familiar with, then they would be more comfortable and stay on in school.

The introduction of elementary school would not only provide that opportunity but schooling in the early years would be brought closer to the home.

This it was argued, would improve the retention of students. The extension of primary school from six years to eight years was also considered an important initiative to improve retention.

Teacher training, the production of teacher and student textbooks and other initiatives were also implemented with the hope they will help to improve student retention.

It is now evident these initiatives had not had much effect in improving retention rates. Close to half of the children who enter Grade 1 are still dropping out.

If we are going to make any significant gains in the next millennium, the introduction of compulsory education needs to be given serious thought and debate.

It will allow all children who are entering first grade to complete primary education.

It will also place the responsibility on parents to ensure children, many of them girls who are currently not being supported and leaving school to stay on and complete school...ENDS

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