

Position Paper: Removing Barriers to Educational Inclusion

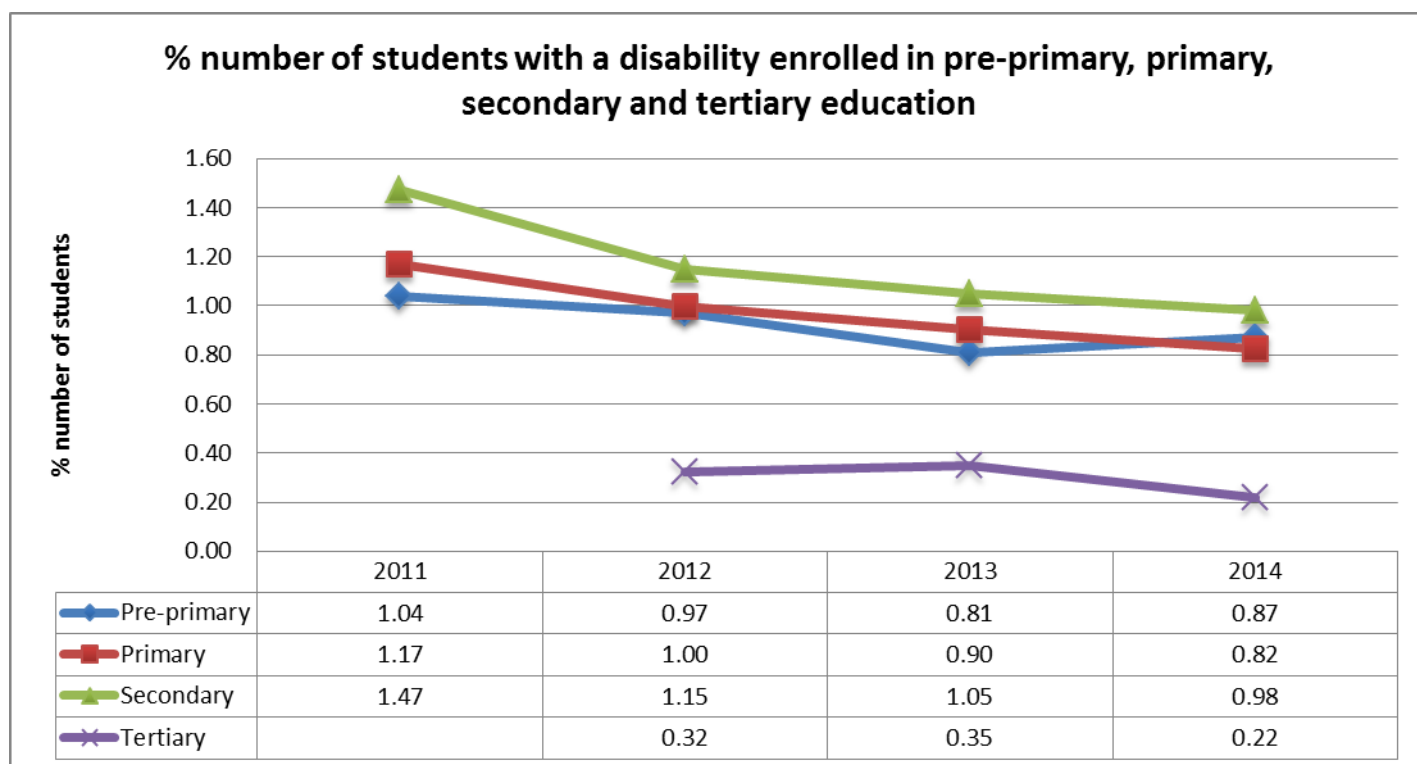
Prepared by VSO Rwanda as part of the INSPIRED project



October 2015

The Ministry of Education’s (MINEDUC) Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2013-2018 confirms that children and youths with special educational needs (SEN) constitute the majority of those who are deprived access to education provision. Children with SEN who start out in education are four times more likely to drop out of school in Rwanda¹. Consequently the ESSP specifically targets children with Special Educational Needs stating that there must be ‘increased equitable access to education for students with special educational needs within mainstream and special schools.’

However progress remains slow and an analysis of data from the MINEDUC statistical yearbook 2011-14² shows that students with disabilities now comprise less than 1% of total students enrolled in pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education in Rwanda. The prevalence of students with disabilities in education is much lower than national prevalence of disability (5%³) and even lower than the global prevalence, which the World Health Organisation states is 15%⁴. Data also shows the number of learners with disabilities enrolling in education over the last 4 years is in decline in primary, secondary and tertiary.



Using data taken from MINEDUC Rwanda Education Statistical Yearbooks 2011, 12, 13 and 14 <http://www.mineduc.gov.rw/resources/statistics/>

¹ Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013-2018 page 25 http://www.mineduc.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Education_Sector_Strategic_Plan_2013_-_2018.pdf

² <http://www.mineduc.gov.rw/resources/statistics/>

³ The RPHC4 Thematic Report: Socio-economic Characteristics of Persons with Disabilities | National Institute of Statistics Rwanda 2015

<http://statistics.gov.rw/publications/rphc4-thematic-report-socio-economic-characteristics-persons-disabilities>

⁴ <http://www.who.int/disabilities/en/>

Not all schools and learning institutions are adequately equipped with appropriate facilities, learning materials and teaching aids and specially trained teachers to integrate children with special needs⁵.

The successful inclusion of learners with SEN relies on the removal of barriers and harmonisation within the education system to ensure that learners enjoy their equitable right to education. This paper proposes some of the positive actions that need to be taken in order to both welcome and facilitate the diverse population of children who have SENs into school.

Why Now?

The current and forthcoming changes in the education system present an un-missable opportunity to ensure that children with SEN have their right to education fulfilled. The successful implementation of the new Competence Based Curriculum; the development and implementation of the Special Curriculum for learners with Intellectual Disabilities; the roll out of new quality standards; research into the causes of school drop-out; implementation of the new Inclusive Education and Special Needs Policy (which is still to be disseminated), the review of the Education Sector Policy and Education Sector Strategic Plan are important ways to fulfil the needs of special learners.

Furthermore,

- Rwanda is adopting a much-welcomed new learner centred and competency based approach to learning. It follows the move globally for educational inclusion for all to become the norm, as outlined in the 1994 Salamanca Statement for Action on Special Educational Needs and UNESCO's Education for All. According to the statement, children should have access to regular schools with "child centred pedagogy" which is capable of meeting their needs.
- Inclusive education will also feature more prominently in the UN development agenda than it has ever before. The new draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will follow the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), look to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Whilst Rwanda has had much success in meeting the MDGs, especially towards achieving universal primary education, the next challenge will be to include and support **all** its SEN learners in accessing and completing a quality education from 2016 onwards.
- The move to include SEN learners also supports Rwanda's obligation to fulfil the rights of children with disabilities to education⁶ as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (ratified by the Government of Rwanda in 2008).

The New Competence Based Curriculum

The roll out of new National Competency based Curriculum and the presence of Inclusive Education (IE) as a crosscutting theme presents an unparalleled opportunity to ensure the needs of moderate SEN learners are met.

The forthcoming Inclusive Guidance Manual will form a part of the New Curriculum documentation and it is a positive step that representatives from all schools will receive training on this. These and other initiatives such as resource centres support the draft SEN Policy requirement that "planned and standardized programs" should be deliberately put in place to identify and assess the educational needs of a wide range of learners, with varying categories of disabilities.

However a number of issues must be considered as the new Inclusive Guidance Manual is developed and teachers are trained on IE⁷.

⁵ Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013-2018 page 25 http://www.mineduc.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/Education_Sector_Strategic_Plan_2013_-_2018.pdf

⁶ Article 24 – States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

Implementation: The fast pace of roll out of the new curriculum means that SEN and IE are at risk of being left behind or an afterthought. Ideally inclusive education implementation should be harmonised in the roll out of the national curriculum in order to embody the theory and practice of mainstreaming. It is essential that the pace of reforms is also reflected in Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education if the thinking behind the New Curriculum is to be realised, that: “The curriculum must ensure that every individual is valued” and further that “Learning must be organised so that all learners thrive including ... learners with special educational needs.”⁸

On-going monitoring of implementation: The implementation of IE as a cross cutting issue needs to be monitored and evaluated on an on-going basis to ensure that SEN learners are able to access the new competency based curriculum. In particular, evidence needs to be gathered by the REB inspectorate on whether every school has had a teacher trained on IE, are using the guidance and are effectively applying the recommendations through a set of nationally approved standards. Follow up monitoring and inspection needs to be undertaken to ascertain the impact and progress in delivering IE for special needs learners. VSO has developed a set of standards for monitoring the progress of IE, which can be utilised by REB.

Pre-service Curriculum teacher training: All pre-service teachers should also benefit from detailed training in inclusive training and guidance. Training developed for the roll out of the new curriculum should be integrated into teacher training to ensure that pre-service teachers are adequately trained in IE and SEN.

Continuous Professional Development: IE and SEN must feature in continuous professional development of teachers too to ensure that they are updated on developments in special needs and inclusive education. Training must also focus on practical learning exercises so teachers are able to effectively implement the theories behind IE.

Educating children with severe sensory, behavioural and physical impairments: There remains a gap in provision for children with profound and severe needs who do not have intellectual impairments but cannot attend mainstream school (such as those who have severe physical disabilities but an ability to study the national competency based curriculum). Currently there is not a strategy to accommodate these learners; many end up in special centres with children with intellectual impairments, which is not the correct or appropriate learning environment. This gap in provision and curriculum should be acknowledged and addressed in the forthcoming review of the Education Sector Strategic Plan.

Recommendation:

- 1. To act quickly to ensure that SEN and disability are an integrated part of the current educational reforms, rather than a subsequent add-on.**
- 2. The REB should develop and roll out a set of nationally approved standards to assess the progress and impact of IE as a cross-cutting issue in the new competency based curriculum.**
- 3. The review of the Education Sector Strategic Plan should seek to address the gap in curriculum and provision for children with severe sensory, behavioural and physical impairments.**

Improving educational outcomes of SEN learners

Considerable work is being undertaken in Rwanda to improve understanding around the causes and impact of SEN on educational access and opportunities. It is also welcome that the problem of drop out, which is significant issue amongst

⁷ Teacher training and guidance on IE is being developed by members of the Government’s Inclusive Education Taskforce. Chaired by REB, MINEDUC and UNICEF, and implemented by Handicap International, the taskforce is responsible for overseeing the roll out of inclusive education in the new Competence Based Curriculum with at least one teacher from every school being trained in IE. VSOR is a member of the taskforce.

⁸Curriculum Framework Pre-Primary to Upper Secondary

http://reb.rw/fileadmin/competence_based_curriculum/syllabi/CURRICULUM_FRAMEWORK_FINAL_VERSION_PRINTED.compressed.pdf

children with disabilities, will be investigated at district and national level. However further attention needs to be paid to making sure all parts of the new National Curriculum are accessible and the needs of learners are met.

Accessible learning materials: The new IE and SEN policy highlights the fact that there has been a deficit in including appropriate alternative textbooks and teaching materials, including Braille, in previously procured learning resources. The REB now has access to 2 Braille embossers and software, so the New Curriculum presents an opportunity to ensure that Braille alongside large print texts can now be produced as part of the overall production of new curriculum materials. By filling these gaps in transcription services, Rwanda would lead the way in removing barriers to providing children with resources in an accessible format.

Recommendation: REB should set up technical support and training to ensure that written resources, including text books and examination papers are produced in alternative formats.

Exam concessions: There needs to be guidance developed about exam concessions and a clear system that all schools know about in terms of what modifications are available to ensure that children with disability are able to access exams. Such modifications include the provision of scribes for learners who are unable to use their arms or hands; or providing extra time for students with learning difficulties.

Recommendation: REB should develop and roll out guidance with specific guidance on exam concessions for children with disabilities.

Accessible communication: Rwandan Sign Language is not legally or academically recognised and there is no formal sign language interpretation service. Sign language as a language of instruction is currently neither fully recognised nor integrated into teacher training programs. The forthcoming IE and SEN policy acknowledges that the shortage of such services has a serious impact on equal access to education services in Rwandan schools.

The lack of a standardized sign language has further implications for learners who do progress to higher education. Having coped with school level support, students with hearing impairments are seriously disadvantaged as communication problems persist into higher education and such students are seen to be more likely to drop out, part way through courses.

Recommendation: Specialised sign language and teacher training should be given to teachers in order to provide support to children and students with severe hearing impairment.

Review of the ESSP

The review of the ESSP also presents an opportunity to strengthen inclusive and special education. Whilst the outcome to “increase equitable access to education for students with special educational needs within mainstream and special schools’ is relevant, the indicators could be further developed, especially as currently targets are not being met (the 2014/15 target is for 31,517 children with disabilities to be enrolled in school –the 2014/15 performance was 25,770). The use of enrolment as an indicator also does not give a detailed picture about the educational attainment of children with disabilities once they are in school and does not account for any instances of drop out or repetition. Indicators should be harmonised with those used in the achieving the outcome ‘increased equitable access to 9 years basic education for all children and expanding access to 12 years of basic education’. Furthermore, policy actions to deliver the targets should focus more explicitly on the effective implementation of the new competence based and special curriculums and the forthcoming IE and SNE policy.

Recommendations:

- 1. The review of ESSP should include new indicators for children with disabilities such as transition from primary to lower secondary; transition from lower secondary to upper secondary; and primary completion rates.**
- 2. Policy actions and strategies in delivering these outcomes should be centred around the new curriculums and the IE and SNE policy.**

Improving data collection and disaggregation

Currently data on children with disability in the MINEDUC Statistical Yearbook only includes enrolment, sex, class level and impairment type. Whilst trends in enrolment can be crudely monitored, the levels of drop out and attendance rates are very difficult to ascertain as there is no data on completion. Furthermore there is no data on educational attainment such as sitting and passing the National exams. Children with disabilities are also not recorded by ubudehe category

The lack of data is a significant barrier to monitoring of inclusive education especially in the ESSP. It will also present a challenge as well in monitoring IE as a cross cutting issue as well as the implementation of the IE and Special Needs Education Policy (once it has been disseminated). The lack of disaggregated quality data also makes it extremely difficult for school leadership to plan accordingly and for accurate budgets to be formulated and executed.

Also there is a lack of data about children out of school who have a disability. This needs to be taken into account to ensure that all children are reached and are able to access education.

Recommendation:

MINEDUC statistical yearbook includes detailed disaggregated data, especially on disability beyond enrolment. It would also be helpful to include ubudehe category. It should also be published in March / April to inform budget processes.

Budget for IE and SEN

The Ministry of Education has committed to increasing its efforts in relation to special educational needs (SEN) and inclusive education. However this is an area that has not received any significant budget commitments to date, beyond 12m RWF earmarked for the dissemination of the IE and SNE Policy.

Furthermore, the roll out of the IE as a cross-cutting theme in the Competence Based Curriculum is being funded by UNICEF and implemented by HI. It is unclear where future funding will be available for follow up and refresher training.

While the education sector has seen strong increases in its budget year on year up to 2014/15, its share of the national budget has fallen: from 21.3% in 2006 to 12.3% in 2015/16⁹. MINEDUC's latest data also shows at primary level that repetition rates and drop out rates are increasing again after a period of decline. It points to under investment in education more broadly, including IE and SEN, which needs to be addressed.

Recommendations:

- 1. The Government of Rwanda should adopt a shared target of reaching 20% of the national budget for education by 2017/18.**
- 2. The Government of Rwanda should consider creating a special budget line for special educational needs (SEN), in order to properly enable schools to work towards the commitments made in the ESSP in relation to inclusive and**

⁹ Save the Children – A Briefing Paper: INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN RWANDA. November 2015

special education. This will include delivering IE and SNE training for pre-service teachers, in-service teachers as part of the curriculums and CPD and availing accessible materials and assistive devices.

3. The Government of Rwanda should monitor closely budget execution within all programmes. Where budget underspends occur the Government of Rwanda could consider timely re-allocations to support inclusive and special education goals.

Including IE and SEN in School Strategic Planning

SEN is not currently a required part of school strategic planning. Research carried out by VSO in 69 primary schools across the country, indicated that it is a low priority, even in schools which have received technical support in developing strategic planning. Of the schools surveyed, only three mentioned inclusion as one of its priorities in terms of strategic action planning. Overall, inclusion placed 16th on the list of common priorities.

School priority	Number of schools	% of schools
1. School environment (buildings etc.)	37	54%
2. Quality of education	30	43%
3. P6 examination pass rate	20	29%
16. Inclusion	3	4%

School leaders already have the responsibility to progress Inclusive Education, as documented in the Norms and Standards for Special and Inclusive Education in Rwanda where it states, “School management plans of action (should) facilitate inclusion of learners with a range of SEN¹⁰.”

The Salamanca Statement confirms that the head teacher has “special responsibility in promoting positive attitudes.” Furthermore, children with special needs are to be seen as the responsibility of the educational team, rather than the individual teacher.

School management must take these additional needs into account to “ensure inclusiveness so that every individual is valued and there are high expectations of every learner¹¹”. SEN needs to be part of every school’s strategic planning, with clear evidence of the steps that will be taken to promote increased and successful inclusion, with reference to both infrastructure and classroom practice.

Recommendation:

1. All school leaders to have time-bound SEN targets as part of strategic planning. These should clearly show the steps that are being undertaken in order to improve access to learning in the classroom as well as improvements to physical access through reasonable adjustments to infrastructure.

Changing Attitudes

Negative attitudes towards disability and SEN remain one of the biggest barriers to inclusion. Children with intellectual impairment are particularly at risk of exclusion through stigma, discrimination and lack of understanding. The Roles and Guidelines for Quality Inclusive Education in Rwanda supports the assertion that the education of children with

¹⁰ Section 4 School Management: 2.5 b. School management plan of action to facilitate inclusion of learners with a range of SEN and taking it into account – Norms and Standards for Special and Inclusive Education in Rwanda

¹¹Curriculum Framework Pre-Primary to Upper Secondary page 19

http://reb.rw/fileadmin/competence_based_curriculum/syllabi/CURRICULUM_FRAMEWORK_FINAL_VERSION_PRINTED.compressed.pdf

disabilities and SEN is made more difficult because of community expectations and preconceptions, noting that it is “threatened by negative cultural attitudes.”

The Norms and Standards for Special and Inclusive Education in Rwanda recommend that Parents’ and Teachers’ Associations and children’s representatives have an input into the running of both special and inclusive schools. Further to this, local leadership and parent communities should work together to support the learning of children with SEN. As part of this, PTAs would be “Geared towards enhanced awareness rising on disability, SNE and IE.”

Recommendation:

- 1. Local authorities should provide training for PTAs and community groups on the rights of children with SEN and disability to access education.**
- 2. Local authorities should run training programs to sensitise schools and communities to promote an understanding that each child has the right to be seen first as an individual, deserving dignity and respect, even before the implications of their SEN are addressed.**

Conclusion

This is an exciting time in education for Rwandan children, with reforms that place the learner where they belong, at the centre of educational methodology.

Actively working towards removing barriers to education for those learners with SEN, while recognising that inclusion is the responsibility of all members of the school and wider community, has the potential to make current educational reforms into a life changing experience for **all** Rwandan children.

A case study: Overcoming exclusion in Nyagatare

A VSO Leadership Mentor in the Nyagatare District reported that a new head teacher has inclusion at the heart of her mission statement. As part of her efforts to build a truly inclusive school, she went out into the community to actively encourage families to send their children with SEN and Disability into school. This head teacher has been successful, to a degree, and as a result of her determination and resourcefulness there are now a number of children with physical disabilities on roll and attending her school.

However, this head teacher encountered barriers within the community and at family level. Many families were embarrassed by their child’s weakness or could see little point in providing a uniform and equipment for a child who they perceived as having ‘no future’. She encountered children who had already been excluded from school and others for whom physical access was a barrier.