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CHALLENGES THAT SCHOOLS FACE Kilala Devette-Chee IN THE DELIVERY OF QUALITY BASIC EDUCATION IN MOMASE REGION

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Key Points

- A review of basic education in Momase schools has uncovered pressing Tuition Fee-Free (TFF) policy issues.
- TFF funds are not often received on a timely basis in Momase schools.
- While TFF has improved access to education and schools have benefited from government funding, factors that contribute to the deteriorating state of quality education continue to persist.
- The TFF policy has enabled students to repeat grades they did not complete.
- The study found that lack of community and parental support is becoming a concern in some schools in Momase.

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CHALLENGES THAT SCHOOLS FACE IN THE DELIVERY OF QUALITY BASIC EDUCATION IN MOMASE REGION

By Kilala Devette-Chee

Introduction

In a recent study by the Universal Basic Education Program (currently known as Education Research Program) research team at the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute (PNG NRI), many challenges were reported in 25 schools in the Momase Region. A survey was carried out in 2018 on reviewing the quality of basic education in selected schools in East Sepik and Morobe provinces by Devette-Chee and others of PNG NRI. This is detailed in Devette-Chee and Norea (PNG NRI Discussion Paper forthcoming, 2022). The aim of the study was to investigate the quality of basic education during the Tuition Fee-Free (TFF) education era. It specifically sought to identify the factors that hindered the delivery of quality education in order to obtain a comprehensive analysis of the underlying issues schools were facing and suggested interventions for policy makers and the Government of PNG to leverage its key resources to improve the quality of education in the region. The participants in the survey were 25 headteachers, 310 teachers and 2,256 students corresponding to a total of 2,591 participants. This paper reports some of the challenges this study found and suggests recommendations that need to be put in place to re-cultivate the essence of quality learning.

Contributing factors to the deteriorating state of quality learning

While TFF has improved access to education and schools have benefited from government funding/subsidies for the past 10 years, factors that contribute to the deteriorating state of quality education need immediate intervention in order to improve the essence of quality education. The Momase study revealed some concerns which are discussed as follows:

Overcrowding in the classrooms

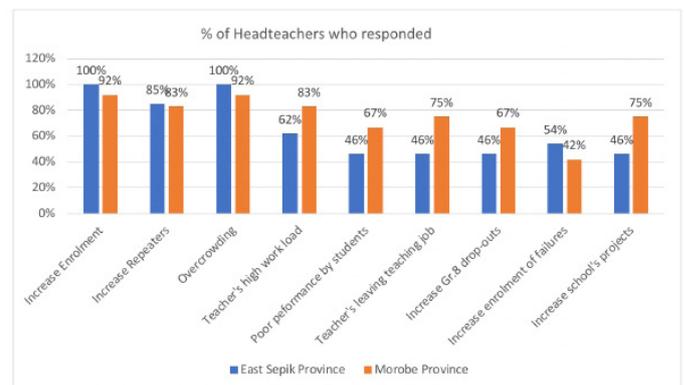
Participants in the Momase study raised concerns about overcrowding. 100 percent of headteachers from East Sepik and 92 percent from Morobe (See Figure 1) reported varying problems that they encountered which impacted negatively on their performance, thus, resulting in the drop of quality learning.

Teachers' heavy workload

Increased student enrolments and increased repeaters as reported in the previous sections clearly exacerbate not only the issue of overcrowding but also the repercussions it has on

the workload of teachers. These teachers struggle to meet the requirements of the curriculum but their concerns regarding the difficulties they face such as marking exercise books on a regular basis, having a one-on-one student-teacher interaction on a daily basis, identifying individual student's strengths and weakness in classes where student numbers are maximised to for example 70 to 80 students, are not often heard and thus become problematic. The disproportionate high number of students to a teacher in a classroom is overwhelmingly very high which subsequently results in poor performance of students which compromises quality learning.

Figure 1. Headteachers' comments on the effects of TFF policy on quality education



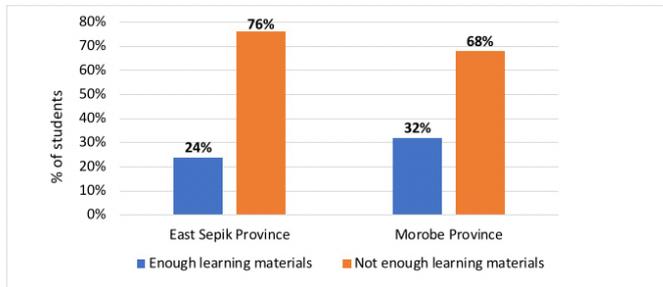
Data Source: Devette-Chee and Norea (2022, Forthcoming)

The Momase study found that 62 percent of East Sepik headteachers and 83 percent from Morobe reported their struggles of heavy workload due to very high teacher-pupil ratios.

Inadequate students' learning materials

Children's learning is influenced by the availability of textbooks and learning materials, the space and furniture available for studying. Therefore, with the increasing number of students in schools as a result of the TFF policy, these issues need to be resolved in order for qualitative teaching and learning to take place.

Figure 2. Students' responses on the availability of learning materials in school per province



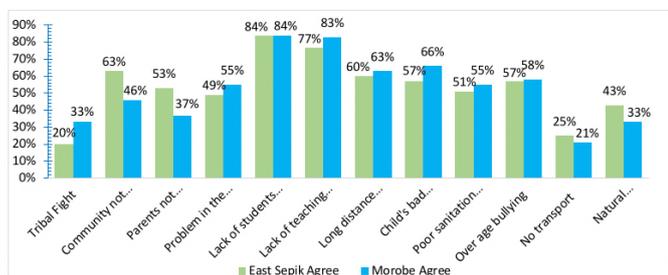
Data Source: Devette-Chee and Norea (2022, Forthcoming)

This issue is evidenced in the Momase study in Figure 2 where 76 percent of the 1,340 students in Morobe and 68 percent of the 916 students in East Sepik reported that they did not have enough learning materials in their classrooms. The students reported that in most cases, they had to share a textbook or a worksheet between three or four students which affected their learning progress. Supporting this issue are findings from teachers in Figure 3 where 84 percent of the 127 teachers from East Sepik and 84 percent of the 183 teachers from Morobe reported similar concerns. A similar scenario is seen with teaching resources, infrastructure and learning facilities on the next section.

Inadequate resources for learning

The supply and re-supply of textbooks and teaching resource materials to primary schools has long been a major constraint to providing quality education. In most cases the pupil-textbook ratio has been too high to ensure sufficient textbook access for each pupil to master the subject matter as per the curriculum. Teachers in Momase reported disappointing and acute shortages of teaching resources and inadequate school equipment and infrastructure in their schools.

Figure 3. Teachers' responses on the challenges faced in school

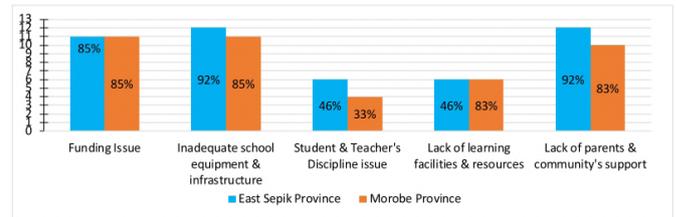


Data Source: Devette-Chee and Norea (2022, Forthcoming)

While 77 percent of teachers in East Sepik and 83 percent of teachers in Morobe (See Figure 3) reported lack of teaching resources in their schools, 92 percent of headteachers in East Sepik and 85 percent in Morobe (See Figure 4) showed concerns about the inadequate school equipment and infrastructure schools had. It was far worse in rural schools where textbooks are either outdated or not received on time

and teachers had to create their own teaching and learning resources from their own pockets. Some teachers reported they travelled to neighbouring schools that had photocopying machines to make copies of assignments and exercises for their students.

Figure 4. Headteachers responses on the challenges faced in school



Data Source: Devette-Chee and Norea (2022, Forthcoming)

Lack of parental and community support

Quality learning is reinforced when there is partnership between the school and the home learning environment. Parents must ensure that their children are healthy, well fed and encouraged to attend school regularly. The quality of children's lives before the commencement of formal schooling and during formal schooling greatly influences the kind of learners they can become. Quality learners are produced when children are kept healthy through nutritious diets and medical support, positive early childhood experiences, and sound home support for their learning. The Momase study found that 92 percent of headteachers from East Sepik and 83 percent from Morobe (See Figure 4) reported the lack of parental support as well as community support in their schools which is a worrying concern.

Poor sanitation facilities

Poor water and sanitation facilities have been identified as being a major reason for children, particularly girls, dropping out of school. There is a desperate need for all schools to be able to provide both an adequate supply of safe drinking water as well as sufficient toilet facilities. It is imperative that schools must purchase water tanks and/or water systems to provide all-year-round access to clean water as children cannot be expected to study to the best of their ability if they do not have access to clean water. The Momase study revealed that more than 50 percent of teachers in East Sepik and Morobe (see Figure 3) reported that there are poor sanitation facilities in their schools and called for extra funding from the government to build new toilets to replace the ones that are now in a dilapidated state.

TFF funding issues

Remittance of TFF funds to schools throughout PNG has been problematic since its inception in 2012 (Nunn and Nelson, 2019). Headteachers have continued to voice their concerns as it has taken a toll on the progression of a school's

continuity. Examples of newspaper headlines portraying the delay of funds from the Government to schools include; *Delay in TFF funding hits schools in PNG* (PNG Education News, 8/02/2018), (Schools waiting for funds (The National, 3/09/2020), *Tuition fee-free funding inconsistent: Teacher* (PNG Education News, 12/06/2021). Like many schools in PNG, schools in the East Sepik and Morobe provinces had their share of TFF funds delayed. This is shown in Figure 4 where majority of the headteachers; 84 percent in both provinces reported that TFF funds were not always disbursed to schools on time which in turn hampered the schools' calendar of activities.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The findings of the Momase study are no different to reports that have been shared in the literature by several authors such as Walton et al. (2017), Goro and Norea (2021), and Walton and Hushang (2022). Multitudes of parents are thankful that their perennial financial burdens are greatly eased. However, parents and other stakeholders are silent on the 'quality of teaching and learning or quality of education' issues as this falls outside of their realm. What is needed and calls for immediate attention from the Government and provincial governments of East Sepik and Morobe are:

1. To ensure that TFF funds are committed towards supporting quality education improvement programs in their provinces.
2. Make teaching and learning atmosphere in the classrooms attractive to retain school-age children in school for the full cycle from Elementary to Grade 12 thus increased funding to schools is paramount.
3. Committed effort must be taken by headteachers to report to standard officers the demarcation of funds for educational infrastructure as well and how much for 'quality education improvement programs'.
4. To ensure that TFF funds are disbursed on a timely basis to schools.
5. The provincial governments of East Sepik and Morobe must devise a better strategy on the dispatchment of teaching and learning resources to schools.

6. Train and employ more qualified teachers to minimise the issue of high teacher-pupil ratio.
7. Build more classrooms to cater for the increasing number of students annually.

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About the Author

Dr Kilala Devette-Chee is a Senior Research Fellow and the Program Leader of the Education Research Program at the PNG National Research Institute. She holds a PhD in Educational Linguistics and Masters in English Language Teaching from the University of Canberra as well as a Postgraduate Diploma in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from the Australian National University. Her current research interests include language education, cross-cutting issues in education and she advocates for quality education, which is the foundation to creating sustainable development in PNG.