



KNOWLEDGE
ACCESSIBILITY



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
OPPORTUNITY

#Education4All!

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATION
FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF CHILDREN WITH
DISABILITIES, THEIR FAMILIES AND EDUCATION
PROFESSIONALS IN BELIZE

SEPTEMBER 2018



INFORMATION AND SUPPORT
EMPOWERMENT



INCLUSION
PARTICIPATION



REALIZE



Foreword

This community consultation, report and recommendations has been undertaken by Realize, a not-for-profit organisation based in Belize and the United Kingdom which works to support the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of society within Belize, particularly in accessing healthcare, education, employment and leisure.

We are grateful for the support of all the individuals with disabilities and their families and carers who trusted in Realize to share their experiences, and kindly participated in the consultation. We also recognise the input of key individuals and organisations including the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, the National Resource Centre for Inclusive Education (NaRCIE), Belize Council for the Visually Impaired (BCVI), Belize Assembly for Persons with Diverse Abilities (BAPDA), The Inspiration Center and Hillside Rehabilitation Center. Without their invaluable participation, this research might not have been possible.



Special thanks goes to Joseph for drawing the illustrations used within this report.

Contents

Foreword.....	3
Contents.....	5
Summary.....	7
About #Education4All.....	9
The right to access education.....	11
The importance of education.....	11
The goal of #Education4All.....	12
Individuals with disabilities in Belize.....	13
Recognising persons with disabilities in Belize.....	15
The status of individuals with disabilities in Belize.....	15
Education provision for students with disabilities in Belize.....	16
Organisations supporting individuals with disabilities.....	18
#Education4All uncovered.....	21
Our research – how we did it.....	23
Key findings.....	24
Providing #Education4All.....	33
The solution.....	35
Key recommendations.....	35
What Realize will do.....	36
Working together for all.....	37
Building inclusion through unity.....	39
References.....	40

The bird is _____



Why are we always left aside



I don't want to be here



Summary

This report provides a wide-ranging analysis of the experiences of individuals with disabilities as they access education in Belize. The insights were gathered through interviews, surveys and secondary research which explored the perspectives on individuals with disabilities, their parents and carers and education professionals. Focusing on qualitative information this report aims to relay the day-to-day experience of children with disabilities, their families and teachers.

The population of individuals with disabilities in Belize is significant and growing, however they are often at the fringes of opportunity with considerable barriers in place in accessing healthcare, education, employment and leisure.

This report found that:

1. Children with disabilities are not being supported to fulfil their potential
2. Families feel alone as they seek to gain an education for their child
3. Teachers are not equipped to support the inclusion of children with disabilities

These barriers result from the combination of a range of factors, including:

1. Poor accessibility – in terms of language, physical access and culture within the school
2. Limited Special Educational Needs training across the professional education community
3. Lack of access to disability information and resources for teachers, and similarly for families who wish to understand how they can support the learning and development of their child
4. Poor communication between families and teachers
5. Teachers feeling at capacity within the classroom and unable to give the time needed to children with disabilities in their class
6. Children with disabilities are exposed to discrimination from and within the school, often viewed as a burden with little potential
7. Children with disabilities are experiencing bullying, often leading to the child withdrawing from school.
8. Teaching style and content is often rigid and not flexible, there is little or no creativity to meet a range of learning needs to allow children with different learning styles to achieve their potential
9. Teaching is often focused on what the teacher needs to deliver, and it is not child-centered.
10. There is little or no transition planning for children moving up to the next class or when they move beyond the school

As a result of the insights contained within this report the following recommendations are made:

1. Accessibility study focusing on both physical and cultural accessibility of schools in Belize, with the report to include recommendations and training required as to how schools can create accessible environments for children with disabilities
2. Special Education Needs training to be embedded in all teacher training so that all teachers have a foundation in special needs prior to working in the classroom
3. A mandatory Special Education Needs element to be included within ongoing CPD requirements for qualified and practising teachers
4. Development of an online disability information platform for teachers and families, where best practice, resources and information can be shared

5. Schools to have a clear and transparent communication framework for families and teachers starting from enrolment throughout the child's time at school, including tools that a child with a disability and their family can use alongside the teacher to help the teacher get to know the child ahead of them starting school.
6. Additional learning support for teachers present in classes where there is a child or children with disabilities
7. Disability awareness workshops to be delivered to all school and administrative staff
8. Workshops on inclusion and leadership to be delivered to school leaders
9. Annual disability awareness campaign to be launched within all schools
10. Development of anti-bullying framework for school and strategies and tools to promote and support the reduction of bullying.
11. A review of the teacher training programmes to ensure:
 - a. a child-centred approach is embedded in all elements of the training
 - b. teachers are supported to develop the skills and resources to deliver teaching and assessment in a variety of ways to meets the needs and abilities of students
12. Development of a framework, strategy and resources to support children with disabilities through transitions within their education career
13. Development of a national framework and resources to support individualised learning for children with disabilities
14. Self-advocacy platform, framework and toolkit for children and young people with disabilities within schools to promote and raise self-esteem, confidence and advocacy skills

The report concludes with a series of practical steps which Realize aims to undertake in order to support the realisation of these recommendations.

In addition, it is concluded that a collaborative platform which brings together all groups, organisations and individuals who wish to see inclusive care needs to be formed in order to build sustainable change – the responsibility does not lie with any single organisation but rather in the coordinated action of the many.

About #Education4All

WHY DOES ACCESS TO EDUCATION MATTER?

WHAT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE WITH THIS
REPORT?

Welcome



The right to access education

Every child has the right to education. The Convention of the Rights of the Child says “State Parties recognise the right of children to education”¹

Article 29 of the Convention focuses on the aims of education and says that governments agree that the education of the child shall be directed to ensure:²

- *The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;*
- *The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*
- *The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilisations different from his or her own;*
- *The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;*
- *The development of respect for the natural environment.*

In Belize, all children aged 5-14 years old are obliged to attend school³, and under the Belizean Families and Children Act, it is legislated that:

- *The State shall take appropriate steps to ensure that children with disabilities are afforded equal opportunities to education.*⁴

In addition, within the Belizean Education and Training Act (2010) it is stated that:

- *The Ministry shall ensure equitable access for both sexes to education at all levels, and that provision of education is sensitive to the particular needs of both males and females, and caters to the special needs of challenged pupils.*

From a young age, an individual’s chances to progress through education in step with their peers are reduced through challenges such as physical access to school buildings and transportation, lack of awareness and training in teachers and other professionals, and in some cases fear or low enthusiasm on the part of family that education will lead to their children ever being able to capitalise on any education experienced.

Legislation such as that above is critical to the removal of barriers to education, meaning that children with disabilities are able to progress through the stages of their educational career realising the same opportunities and potential as all other children.

The importance of education

The role of education is to:

*be a means to empower children and adults alike to become active participants in the transformation of their societies. Learning should also focus on the values, attitudes and behaviours which enable individuals to learn to live together in a world characterized by diversity and pluralism.*⁵

As one of the foundation Sustainable Development Goals education is recognised as the key that will allow many other SDGs to be achieved.⁶

As such, it is clear that individuals with disabilities have an equal right to be part of the education system as everyone else. Not only is there an inherent right to be included, through education children with disabilities are able to build the skills, knowledge and confidence with which they can become fully functioning members of society.

A World Bank study estimated that within Latin America and the Caribbean potentially 6.6% of GDP is lost annually due to exclusion of individuals from the workforce, and globally lack of inclusion could equate to \$1.9 billion lost.⁷ At the heart of this reduction in GDP lies exclusion from education, meaning that otherwise productive individuals cannot contribute to society.

Beyond this, an inclusive approach to education builds further benefits, including:

- Reduction of stigmatisation and negative social attitudes towards disability, leading to greater social cohesion
- Higher achievement than in segregated settings due to the focus that it brings to planning, implementation and schooling of children
- Developing education as a way in which groups and individuals can more actively understand and engage in society as a whole.⁸

The goal of #Education4All

The goal of this report is to provide an insight into the education provision for individuals with disabilities and the way in which they experience education.

It is hoped that this report can provide a springboard from which services and support can be developed both by Realize and other organisations. Through gaining a perspective on the provision that exists the intent is to identify where additional services, approaches and perspectives can fill gaps and where current services can be leveraged to develop a more holistic and coordinated response to meet the critical needs of individuals with disabilities.

Guided by the principles of inclusion and belief that every individual, regardless of ability should expect and deserves equal access to education resulting actions are intended to:

- Raise awareness of the needs of individuals with disabilities in Belize
- To provide a vehicle for individuals with disabilities in Belize to self-advocate, enabling them to have a voice, be understood and feel valued
- To identify what is working well in education for children and young people with disabilities in Belize
- To identify the challenges for children and young people with disabilities in accessing education in Belize
- To make recommendations based on the findings of how education in Belize can be improved to be more inclusive of children and young people with disabilities and enable them to reach their potential.

All data and insights collected have been contextualised within the Belizean social environment and landscape and benchmarked against good practice in the disability sector elsewhere. This report is not designed to be a definitive document in presenting the education provision within Belize, but to add to the existing if somewhat sparse analysis of disability services and present a narrative which represents the trends, challenges and needs that exist in Belize.

Individuals with disabilities in Belize

WHO IS THE COMMUNITY OF PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES IN BELIZE?

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH
DISABILITIES IN BELIZE?

WHAT EDUCATION PROVISION IS AVAILABLE TO
PUPILS WITH DISABILITIES IN BELIZE?



Recognising persons with disabilities in Belize

There is no uniform definition or classification of disability in Belize which creates challenges in studying the scope of individuals with disabilities. Figures ranging from 2-26%, are reported depending on which study is examined. This poses a major challenge in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs or policies that need to be put in place. There are a range of disability support models used in Belize, including the charity model however, more so in recent years, the social model has been adopted as put forward by the World Health Organisation.

With figures varying, the most common figures tend to suggest 5.9% Belizean population experience disabilities, with the highest percentage living in Cayo (29%)⁹. However, due to underreporting and low diagnosis rates this may be an underestimate. With no change in the disability risks as measured in the 2000 Census, it is estimated that the percentage of persons with disabilities in Belize will rise to 9.5% by 2025 and 14.6% by 2050.¹⁰

36.4% of children age 2 to 9 in Belize are at risk of having one or more disabilities such as physical, auditory and visual impairment, learning disability or intellectually challenged. Children in rural communities are at a higher risk than children in urban areas: 41.4% to 28.3%.¹¹

The status of individuals with disabilities in Belize

Belize has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities however no legislation has been enacted which specifically supports the rights of person with disabilities. In the absence of a Disability Act the rights of all individuals to experience non-discrimination are enshrined within the Belizean Constitution and the Families and Children Act. This latter Act is the foundation of support and protection of children in Belize and makes specific reference to children with disabilities, but only in that it directs the State to ensure that children with disabilities are afforded equal opportunities to education and requires parents to seek assessment and treatment for children with disabilities.¹²

International Disability Rights Monitor *Report of the Americas 2004* concluded that Belize was one of the least inclusive nations in the Americas with regard to disability and lacked the basic elements necessary for the social inclusion of people with disabilities.¹³ Belize stands out as the only country in the Americas which provides no legal protections specifically for people with disabilities.

Within Belize, the perception of disability is changing, however there is still underlying stigmatisation present which impacts on individuals' ability to access services and the standard of service delivery which they are offered. There is an increased desire to develop inclusive services, as evidenced by the Regional Conference on Children with Disabilities held in Belize

“My son was bullied at Grade 1 by teachers and children. When I approached the school, they said I complained too much. I was worried my child was not safe and something bad would happen, so I decided to take him out of school.”

City in October 2016 and the recommendations and Call to Action¹⁴ which were issued as a result. However, cultural and institutional inertia leads to slow progress in effecting tangible change. In Belize, there is still an urgent need to raise awareness around disability, include individuals with disabilities more fully in society and create opportunities for them to be wholly accepted and empowered within their local communities.

Education provision for students with disabilities in Belize

All children aged 5-14 years are required to access education, however there are considerable barriers for families of children with disabilities to be able to comply with this requirement. In 2014 it was recorded that 13% of 15-24 year-olds in the general population had not completed primary education, while 33% completed primary but did not complete secondary education¹⁵. The proportion of individuals with disabilities within these groups is unknown but likely to be over-representative.

Within the school system it is mandatory for all teachers to be licensed, with this licensing dependent on appropriate qualifications and ongoing professional development. Decreed in 2012 in an amendment to the Education and Training Act, the requirement is also that teachers undergo professional training and development – however special educational needs training and development is not mandated and is not an element in the majority of teacher training programmes in Belize.

0-3 years

There is no systematic education for children with disabilities during this period. Early stimulation and parental support is provided by Roving Caregivers under the Community and Parent Empowerment Programme (COMPAR), while Early Childhood Development initiatives are underway to support provision within day care settings – however none of these currently require specific training in supporting the needs of children with disabilities.

3-5 years

There is no legislation to explicitly support access to pre-school for children with disabilities. However recently developed ECD policy does support the inclusion of children with disabilities though acknowledges the challenges of access, lack of facilities, the lack of trained teachers, and getting the children from home to the preschool are barriers to the accommodation of children with disabilities.

5-16 years

The government, with the support of NGOs and civil society, is working to establish enabling environments for children however due to lack of resources, finances and co-ordinated efforts to bring about systematic change many children with disabilities face difficulties in accessing and staying in school.

Special education classes or centres have been established in various schools around the country, however the positive intent of these is frequently undermined by a lack of holistic provision, including the availability of fully accessible environments, including accessible toilets, appropriately trained and resourced teachers and differentiated lessons. While a positive step these can often lead to unsatisfactory outcomes for children, families and teachers while raising expectations beyond what they are equipped to deliver. A special education centre may simply refer to a school where there is the provision of a special educational needs classroom or corner dedicated to individualised learning.

“Students with disabilities deserve the right to an education and they have proven to be as smart as any other child.”

Input from NaRCIE and BCVI has improved the inclusion of children with disabilities, however there are many children in school who require additional support as a result of their disability but who have not been identified by teachers or received a diagnosis. Such children are often those with “invisible disabilities” such as ADHD, Dyslexia or Dyspraxia and are often seen by teachers as “lazy”, “troublesome” and “disruptive”. There is also an unseen population of children with disabilities who are not accessing school, many with undiagnosed disabilities and some who rarely if ever leave the family home because parents are fearful of community perceptions and responses to their child.

One school focused on special needs is run in Belize City. Established in 1958, Stella Maris accommodates over 100 pupils with a range of disabilities aged 4-17. However, government policy is to promote inclusion of pupils with disabilities into mainstream settings, so the focus of this consultation is on the inclusivity of broader provision of education.

Transition from school and opportunities aged 16 plus

For the few children with disabilities graduating school there is little to no likelihood of employment due to reluctance on the part of employers and limited opportunity. The option for most is to stay at home, leading to no prospects for a sustainable life. This frequently negatively impacts personal and social progress made during a school career and creates ongoing isolation. This also has a significant impact on the family as there may be the need for someone who was previously working and contributing to the household income to stay at home to support their child. The dependency also raises questions as to what happens to the child as the parents grow older.

The limited likelihood of an individual with disabilities being able to capitalise on an education feeds negatively into expectations that a family has for their child from a young age, leading to parents actively excluding their child from education.

The very low number of individuals with disabilities moving into tertiary and higher education means that institutions are not well equipped to accommodate their needs. This lack of exposure leads to the same challenges seen in earlier stages in education as to teacher and lecturer’s capacity to engage with individuals with disabilities, practical barriers and appropriate resourcing.

Assessment and examinations

The Ministry of Education has established guidelines for additional support for students with disabilities sitting national exams, however the process is dependent on early engagement between the pupil, their parents, the school and the Ministry of Education (the Examinations Unit and NaRCIE) to ensure appropriate support is in place.

Organisations supporting individuals with disabilities

BAPDA

Belize Assembly of Persons with Diverse Abilities (BAPDA) advocates for the rights of persons living with disabilities. The organisation is based in Belize City and is particularly concerned with those living below the poverty line. They offer support in allocating provisions of equipment, specifically for those with physical disabilities when international missions/organisations are in country. The organisation has monthly meetings for its members to meet.

NaRCIE

The National Resource Centre for Inclusive Education (NaRCIE) is a department within the Ministry of Education which works to “ensure that all our children [with disabilities] are provided with equitable opportunities to achieve his/her individual best in all aspects of life”.

With government policy focused on developing mainstream education opportunities for children with disabilities, NaRCIE’s role is to offer a service to support individuals with special educational needs and teachers in mainstream schools in an effort to offer inclusive education.

NaRCIE responds to referrals from schools and then engages with parents, who must offer full consent and support for additional support to be given. With a maximum of two officers present in each region, NaRCIE has limited resource to meet the full needs of children with disabilities and is dependent on strong engagement and productive relationships between parents and schools to create the greatest possible impact.

NaRCIE does not have the capacity and resources to offer all educational services and equipment required to enable a child with a disability to actively participate in school so it works closely with partners to leverage resources equipment as necessary.

Stella Maris

Whilst this consultation and report has focused on the experience of children with disabilities, families and teachers in mainstream schools, it is important to note there is a Special Educational Needs School in Belize City. Stella Maris was established in 1958 to provide educational services to children with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities. Only children who are recommended by NaRCIE after an assessment are accepted to Stella Maris. Recommendations are based on the principle that this school is the best environment for the child to develop intellectually. The school’s mission is “to provide the opportunity to its students to learn academic, daily living skills, personal and social skills, occupational knowledge and specific vocational skills necessary for attaining the highest level possible of economic, personal and social fulfilment.”

BCVI

The Belize Council for the Visual Impaired is a particularly active and impactful organisation on the lives of children with visual impairment. in general, and on the visual impaired. BCVI started in 1981 to provide eye health care (both primary and secondary eye care services) and rehabilitation services. It offers free eye examinations, and treatments and surgeries are provided at an affordable cost, lower than the cost of services in the private practice.

BCVI has Regional Field Officers in each district who work with individuals with disabilities and their families from early years to introduce braille and prepare the child for integration into pre-school. The organisation promotes and supports reading through its literacy

programme, encouraging children to learn and use braille. Summer camps are also provided to encourage children to socialise, have fun and develop key skills to support them on their return to school.

Office of the Special Envoy for Women and Children and The Inspiration Center

The Office of the Special Envoy for Women and Children is a department within the Ministry of Human Development. The Special Envoy's legacy for disability has been the development of The Inspiration Center, the strategic plan for which was established in partnership with UNICEF. The Inspiration Center currently offers community rehabilitation and therapy services including physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and vitalism.

Belize Special Olympics

The Belize Special Olympics is an NGO that promotes the rights and physical and social development of children with intellectual disabilities through sports. Its goal is to promote healthy lifestyle through all-year-round sport activities including regional and national games, torch run, and heroes' award.

Realize

Realize is a user-led NGO that is driven by the needs and aspirations of individuals with disabilities. Its aims are to support the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of community life. The organisation offers information and workshops for individuals with disabilities and their families. Working alongside individuals with disabilities and their families and in partnership with the community, NGO's and local government ministries, the organisation addresses barriers faced by individuals with disabilities and develops projects to bring about long term, sustainable change. Its current projects include Healthcare 4 All! and Education 4 All!

“Some teachers are not prepared to teach students with various types of disabilities. I am a [teacher and a] parent of a child with a disability, and I have experienced first-hand administrators not willing to accept my child in their institution. Factor that into how that child might well be treated in the school system. Children with disabilities have many challenges. I have had to hire help for my child to go into the classroom to work with my child. As a single parent, I struggle along with my child.”

$$2 + 10 = 12$$

$$2 + 3 = 5$$



we desire to be
100%, and work for

we are kids just different.

Our research – how we did it

136 individuals with disabilities, both children and young people, parents and carers and education professionals took part in the consultation. Realize undertook the consultations through a range of methods in order to gain the broadest perspectives. Face-to-face interviews with individuals with disabilities (both children and adults), their families and carers and health professionals took place in Cayo District, Belize City and Toledo. An online survey tool, accessible through the Realize website and disseminated by partner organisations and individuals, was used to gain input from individuals with disabilities, their families and carers and education professionals from across the country. In addition, Realize conducted secondary research using all relevant and available research, reports, and documents including the SITAN of Children with Disabilities (2013), Sitan of Children and Women (2011), Regional Partnership for Children with Disabilities Conference Report (2016) and various international studies for benchmarking purposes.

In order to maintain focus, the thrust of the research revolved around three key areas:

- The experience of children with disabilities and their families in accessing education
- The experience of teachers in providing education for children with disabilities
- The strategic perspective of professional stakeholders and influence in support of the provision of education to children with disabilities

Given the need to ensure that the experiences of individuals with disabilities are at the forefront of the findings of this report, the face-to-face interviews and online survey centred around three key questions:

- What do you think the challenges are for children and young people with a disability in accessing education in Belize?
- What do you feel works well and that you would like to see continue in the education system?
- What are the changes you would like to see happen and do you have any thoughts on how you would like to see this happen?

All responses have been anonymised and correlations have been drawn which have directly led to the findings below. While recognising that every individual is different and has varying healthcare needs, the intent of the report is to draw out trends which are common to all and which represent significant barriers and opportunities to accessing education.

“When I tried to enrol my child in the village pre-school, they refused to let him join and said he would never be able to learn. Later pre-school in another village accepted him. He learnt how to count to 10 and his alphabet. He loved it!

He is too big for me to carry to school now, so at 8 I had to take him out of school.”

Key findings

Over and above the key findings below, a universal perspective came through all forms of research. It was the view of all respondents that:

- Children and young people with disabilities need to be increasingly visible within society
- The voices of children and young people with disabilities need to be heard
- The needs of children and young people with disabilities need to be more greatly understood and respected
- Children and young people with disabilities need to be appreciated as unique individuals and not identified or labelled by their disability

All participants expressed the need for significant change in Belize, as there remains much stigmatisation, lack of awareness and a paucity of education and training surrounding the needs of individuals with disabilities.

I. Children with disabilities are not being supported to fulfil their potential

It was universally perceived by respondents that children with disabilities are not able to achieve their full potential within the Belizean education system. Both parents and teachers recognised that profound limitations are placed on students with disabilities, meaning that they do not keep in step with their classroom peers.

The different perspectives from respondents, whether as parents supporting their children or professionals working within the system, illustrated different aspects of the barriers that exist, and between them they articulated both practical and systemic challenges which result in children within disabilities being failed by the education system. These failings are the result of on-the-ground tactical issues and higher-level strategic implementation alike which require a range of solutions.

Within the system there are individuals and distinct activities which were praised and highlighted as benchmarks for positive action, but every respondent was able to pinpoint issues which resulted in poorer outcomes for children with disabilities. Accessibility in terms of language, physical access and culture within the school are often not considered and can make the difference between a child attending school, gaining an education and achieving their potential and not attending school, remaining at home and leading a life with opportunities lost.

The negative experiences which supported this finding are:

- **Negative attitudes towards disability**

Underpinning the major barriers to inclusion is an attitude which many teachers and schools have towards children with disabilities – this attitude assumes pupils with disabilities to be a “burden” who generally inconvenience the operations and processes within the school. Dialogue between schools and parents is excessively focused on the challenges of disability but does not reflect the individual as a unique human being, with skills, aspirations and capabilities. In many cases it was felt that teachers did not believe it was possible for a child with a disability to learn and achieve, leading to discrimination against them, and an assumption that they would hold the rest of the class back.

“My child role plays her school day when she gets home so I know how many times the teacher shouts at her, the derogatory comments she says to her and how many times she bangs her fist on the table.”

This leads to a perceived deficit in compassion during the education process, where the emotions and sensibilities of children and young people with disabilities and their families are not considered.

In an environment where there is negative attitude towards disability it sets a precedent which is role modelled by the institution to the general student population where it can be mirrored, making issues such as bullying more likely. This presents another factor that contributes to a child withdrawing from school.

Inclusion is not a technical process reflected in methods of teaching and structuring education but is more importantly an approach and ethos in all aspects of school life. School leadership needs to set an expectation on all who are part of the school community, including the principal, teachers, administrative and support staff, as well as students and parents, to adhere to principles acceptance and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

This negative attitude is not one-directional – many teachers reported the difficulty in getting parents to engage productively with the school in support of their child’s education.

This manifests itself in refusing referrals to NaRCIE, lack of acceptance that their child has additional needs, not actively working alongside teachers to provide parallel support at home and general perpetuation of stigma of disability within the family and the community. At times there is perception that education is purely the school’s responsibility and parents elect to abdicate from responsibility, putting the full load onto teachers who are unable to meet the needs. In addition, teachers can become the focus of frustration for parents when resources, systems and processes further along the chain do not deliver positively for children, leading to challenging relationships and frustration on both sides.

Disengagement by parents can be a significant barrier to teachers who wish to support pupils with disabilities, and in turn can instil a negative reaction on the part of institutions when efforts to provide support have been rejected.

Parents and teachers alike reflect the underlying assumptions of the community around them, however as a pivotal institution within the community the role of the school is to provide positive role modelling towards inclusion and set an example as to supporting the potential and achievement of individuals with disabilities.

- **Language**

A clear indicator of the way in which questions around disability are approached is in the use of language surrounding the needs of pupils. Discussions between the school and parents, and teachers and pupils are governed by the language used as this articulates the

expectations and assumptions which underly dialogue. Respondents shared that their experience was that derogatory, negative and non-inclusive language was used.

This ranged from directive language as assertion of authority to insensitive comments and questioning which did not take into consideration the role and existing knowledge of the parents or respect for the child as a person.

While it may be thought of as a trivial matter, the words and terms that are used in discussion can carry a huge amount of weight in setting the framework for participation. The conversations which take place between teacher, pupil and parent are the grounding for the expectations on both sides and are a significant enabler or barrier to the likelihood of inclusion and active participation.

- **Practical barriers**

A range of practical barriers are in place which cause severe impediments to children and young people with disabilities accessing education. These barriers can have a disproportionate impact on students with disabilities due to the additional needs they experience.

At a logistical level, simple physical access to education can be an obstacle: lack of accessibility infrastructure such as ramps, hearing loops, braille signage, accessible toilets and easily navigable spaces are a fundamental barrier to access. For those who require transport to school, inaccessible public transport and the financial burden of owning a vehicle can make this untenable.

At a professional level the practical barriers appear in areas such as materials available (e.g. braille textbooks), structure and management of classrooms and the underlying learning processes. The set-up of the classroom, how children are instructed to sit, interact and behave can create many obstacles to participation, especially when set against assumptions of what learning should “look like”.

The barrier of lack of diagnosis is a significant issue, as it leaves parents, child and teacher uninformed and unable to build appropriate strategies for education. Particularly for “unseen” disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders, dyslexia and dyspraxia, because there may be ambiguity in perception of a child’s needs it leads to uncertainty as to how they can be accommodated.

- **Lack of adjustments to teaching approach**

In teaching children and young people of all needs, the ability for teachers to have an individualised, child-centred approach and adjust their manner of engagement is vital for good education outcomes. When it comes to students with disabilities there is often little to no adjustment in approach when teaching or undertaking assessment.

Many respondents noted that teaching is often “chalk and talk”. Teaching is often rigid and not flexible, there is little or no creativity to meet a range of learning needs to allow children with different learning styles to achieve their potential with little consideration for adaptation. One parent noted that when they approached school to discuss the learning style, the response given was “What he learns at school, he learns and what he doesn’t, he can learn at home.”

Students with disabilities often “fall behind”, not because of their ability but as a result of the approach taken to teaching them. Simple steps can mean the difference between a child succeeding or to continuing struggling throughout the education system leaving the

child or young person unfulfilled and lacking in self-confidence. In some cases, this can also perpetuate risks of bullying.

There are a range of reasons which lead to this lack of adjustment in approach, including:

- Lack of training available to teachers to give them the skills to adjust and differentiate in the classroom
- Rigid learning structure which dictate how teaching should take place
- Fear of adjustments leading to poor results in assessment of the class and the school
- Lack of understanding by school leadership and management towards alternate approaches
- Lack of resource and number of children in the classroom making adaptation impractical
- Lack of awareness as to the importance of differentiation and the impact it can have on an individual's learning

These may feature more in some school contexts than others, requiring a clear understanding of the particular barrier in a particular context.

It is well understood in SEN teaching that the key to a child's success is ensuring that they are educated in a manner which responds to their individual needs, not to the exclusion of common standards and practices, but in a way which differentiates these appropriately, so they can attain the same outcomes as their class peers.

- **Transition between classes**

There is rarely transition planning for children moving up to the next class or when they leave an education institution. Respondents noted that information and strategies do not seem to be shared between the current teacher and new teacher for the next year. As a result, parents find they are "starting from scratch", leading to challenges for the child in readjusting to the new teacher as they "get to know" the child.

Families shared that openness to input from parents and responsiveness to the needs of the child was entirely dependent on the inclination of the teacher, so where a child may have thrived the year before with a teacher that was willing to engage, moving up a year may prove detrimental and lead to the child falling behind. This has a range of impacts including increasing the likelihood that the child may withdraw from school through to a false assumption being created that the child has attained the maximum level they can due to their newly reduced engagement.

Moving from class to class is a challenge for any child, and children with disabilities are no exception, and without a due process to support that change it is highly likely that additional challenges and barriers may be created which hinder the potential for learning and growth.

"They are students that deserve a chance to learn if the teacher would just know how to impart the lessons to them."

2. Families feel alone as they seek to gain an education for their child

Supporting their child to enter and remain within the education system can take significant amounts of courage for parents of children with disabilities. Up to the point where their child enters schooling, the parent has been able to manage the environment, activities and social situation that their child finds themselves in. Going to school means that they have to relinquish some of that control and trust in the school, teachers and education system to provide a positive experience for their child.

As such, parents need to feel a secure and supportive environment around them which gives them faith that their child will not be discriminated against or treated badly, and which will in fact open up new doors and opportunities. Most families reported that they experienced huge amounts of trepidation and uncertainty as they moved their children into the school setting, not just the concerns that any parent has, but more fundamental concerns that the system was not fit for their child.

While parents acknowledge the huge positive impact that individuals within schools or the Ministry of Education have, the overriding sense is that the overall system and the processes which underpin it do not consider the core needs of their children with disabilities.

Fundamental factors which play into this perception include:

- **Denial of school places**

Many families shared that their child had been refused enrolment at school due to their disability, with the majority of reasons given focusing on the claim that the school did not have the facilities or capacity to teach their child. Some families noted that the school felt their child would not benefit from attending classes. In some cases, where a child had been accepted and started to attend school, the school later stated they could no longer support the child, giving the family no option but to withdraw their child.

Experiences such as these have deterred families from approaching other schools leaving many children with disabilities sitting at home with a family member to care for them. This often results in the family having a lower income as only one person is able to work. Families also noted the level of isolation this causes not only for the child but also the broader family members.

- **Accessing information and support**

There is a lack of awareness amongst families as to how they can access the information they need to fully support their children within the education system. This is manifested in limited knowledge about specific support mechanisms and how they can be accessed, such as being aware of NaRCIE and how to mobilise the support available, and general knowledge and support around supporting their child in a range of education contexts.

This sense of lack of access to information and support includes a wide spectrum of needs, from limited availability of diagnosis, through information provision on specific disabilities and knowledge as to how they can enhance the quality of life of their children through developing their own skills and knowledge.

While some families elect not to pursue further insight into the additional needs their child has, the vast majority are eager to develop their skills and knowledge to enhance their child's life. This is in contradiction to a common misconception held among professionals that families do not wish to engage – disengagement is not the starting point, it is the result of negative experience and poor outcomes.

Pockets of support that do exist, such as the work of BCVI with children with visual impairments and their families, are highly regarded and extremely well appreciated because of the positive impact they have. However, those who experience other forms of disability are not as well catered for across their life experience. In addition to information, families reported the sense of isolation they felt, and many expressed a wish for access to family support groups where they could share information and experiences with other families.

Ultimately, families request easy access to information that would help them better understand the needs of their child, what the challenges might be and what they would need to be aware of throughout their child's life, particularly as they grow and develop in their school-age years. Above all, they want to be able to give their child the support and resources they need to lead a happy and fulfilled life.

- **Relationships between families and schools**

Most respondents highlighted the poor communication between families and school which for families created a sense of isolation and that their child was not valued, and which for schools created frustration and cynicism around the potential for development.

From the perspective of families there were two highlighted issues:

- A lack of openness to 2-way communication
- Communication that did take place was often characterised by a lack of compassion and understanding

From the perspective of the schools, teachers highlighted key issues as:

- Severe limits on time available to engage with families due to workload
- Lack of training and awareness on which the foundations of positive communication could develop

The lack of communication between families and school has led many families to feel concerned that the teacher did not have a clear grasp of their child's personality, skills and abilities. In some cases, families reported negative communication from teachers and with the result of the child being withdrawn from school.

The lack of communication has also raised issues for teachers who have highlighted that they have experienced a lack of engagement from parents and commitment to gaining support for their child when the teacher has requested intervention from NaRCIE.

Looking at feedback from both families and teachers, it is clear that serious consideration needs to be given to the causes of poor communication in all instances. It is the child who suffers when those responsible for their care are unable to understand and engage with each other clearly. How this communication may be improved will be understood by gaining clarity over what is happening and what is being communicated. Does the family feel valued, listened to, understood and empowered? Does the teacher understand the family background and work within their context with sensitivity? Is the teacher aware of the information they need and is it being conveyed in a clear, accessible and positive manner?

- **Process of getting support**

Where parents are able to start the process of getting additional support for their child, it can be challenging for them to fully understand and engage with this process. There is

limited awareness of what avenues they can pursue to gain additional support, and a lack of clarity as to how this can be initiated.

At a simple level, knowing how to contact relevant personnel within the Ministry of Education becomes a challenge through lack of presence and visibility within the community. Processes are dependent on clear lines of communication between different stakeholders in a child's education, including the pupil, parents, teacher, school principal and personnel within the Ministry of Education. These communication, information sharing and decision-making processes do not necessarily work to meet the needs of the child as proactively and positively as they could, particularly when parents may not be confident or have limited education themselves.

Thought needs to be given to the way in which processes are administered to ensure that they are child-centric and create the positive and empowering focus which is essential to child development. In addition, the scope of information which is sought is felt by some to be overly intrusive, with details requested which have little bearing on discovering how the needs of a child can be met in the classroom. Peripheral information also has an impact on the degree to which a teacher can feel they are appropriately informed, as they may not be able to discern what is relevant to their teaching practice amongst unnecessary detail.

In line with perceptions outlined above as to deficiencies in the culture of care towards children with disabilities and their families, there are clear needs for the support process to become more engaging, empowering and enabling.

3. Teachers are not equipped to support the inclusion of children with disabilities

Some of the most striking feedback received from teachers relates to the degree to which they feel ill-equipped and unready to work with children with disabilities in the classroom. Many teachers interviewed stated that they had a genuine fear of having a child with a disability in their class because they did not know how to respond to the child's needs. There was also a strong reluctance among teachers interviewed towards having children with disabilities in their class because of lack of human resources, physical resources and time and capacity to engage with them fully.

There was frustration on the part of teachers towards the rigidity of teaching practices, driven by both formal processes but also organic practice, which limits the ways in which children are engaged with in the classroom. This is drawn from the lack of a uniform appreciation and understanding of the needs of students with disabilities across the education profession in Belize. An example of how children with disabilities can be left behind can be seen in the area of pupil assessment. Often, despite support from NaRCIE, teachers do not think creatively in assessing children with disabilities and tend to opt for a one size fits all approach, leaving those children who require an alternative approach to assessment at a loss, often underachieving when had they been assessed in an alternative way may have passed or achieved a higher grade. Teachers state they feel "under pressure by the requirement for continual assessment",

"We do not have trained teachers and the adequate resources in the classroom to teach these students."

some feeling “unsure of how else to assess” and some not feeling they have the time to offer individualised approaches for some students.

Some of the core feedback behind this analysis focused on:

- **Lack of Special Educational Needs training**

Most teachers have not accessed the degree of Special Educational Needs training to ensure their confidence and ability to engage appropriately. While the transition to full professionalisation of teaching is still underway in Belize, it is clear that one aspect which needs to continue to be evolved is skills development in special educational needs.

For many who are already qualified there is a pronounced skills gap which needs to be filled by continuous professional development, while current Associate and Certificate teacher training programmes do not offer the required special educational needs training which is required. Many teachers reported that as a result of this lack of training they have a sense of fear that a child with a disability may enrol and they would not know what to do, while others who have taught children with disabilities shared that they have “had to find their own way” and felt “largely unsupported”.

CPD training in disability is offered when possible, though it is often dependent on out of country expertise to deliver so it is not guaranteed, consistent or directly in response to the needs within Belize. While steps are being taken to develop the skills of some teachers through scholarships which provide access to international SEN Masters programmes, there is still a need to build a broad, general capacity amongst education professionals in-country. In addition, whilst teachers are required to undertake CPD training annually, there is no requirement that they should undertake SEN training as part of that.

Feedback suggests that in many cases teachers avoid participating in CPD SEN training as they do not feel they have capacity to support children with disabilities in their class and undertaking training without having access to appropriate resources and additional support sets expectations which cannot be met.

Beyond core staffing needs, additional signs of lack of training were clearly felt in the communication skills and ability to engage with students with disabilities outlined above, but there were also doubts raised around the capacity of teachers to engage with practice that reflected latest approaches to disability. This potential resistance to absorbing new standards also was perceived in some approaches to current general education standards, such as refusal to move away from “chalk and talk” style teaching.

This was articulated equally by both parents and teachers, reflecting not just family frustrations in adequate support being available but also frustrations on the part of teachers to not be able to deliver the support they see is necessary.

- **Lack of in-country diagnostic services**

While knowing the full diagnosis of a child’s condition is not the only factor in helping teachers understand how they can best support them in the classroom, the absence of necessary diagnosis services within Belize means that teachers are not able to develop in-class strategies from a position of knowledge.

If a school believes they have a child with a disability who needs extra support, they can with the family’s permission request the support of NaRCIE to offer strategies which

“My parents wanted to support me to go to school and did everything in their power to make it happen. The school said I would not be able to attend school as they could not accommodate my physical disability so my parents ran fundraisers and worked with the community to build a ramp to my class, to the toilets and a table that could accommodate my wheelchair.”

enable the inclusion and development of the child, however they are unable to diagnose and themselves have limited resources.

This leads to pupils, parents and teachers being frequently in the dark and unable to access best practice or general knowledge which could have a significant impact on the child’s life, because there is not clarity over what they should be looking for.

- **Information and support**

There is a marked lack of access to disability information and resources for teachers. Teachers revealed a lack of awareness of the range of disabilities a child may experience in their class and how they would work with the child. Teachers also revealed a lack of awareness of other organisations such as BCVI and NaRCIE that can offer support to schools where there are children with disabilities in attendance.

- **Lack of resources**

Teachers report that they are at capacity and do not feel they have the time needed to successfully support children with disabilities in their class. The majority of teachers reported that they do not have any additional support in the classroom, often with classes of 30 plus, and so are concerned that they would not have the time to appropriately support a child with disabilities without it having an impact on the other students in the class. Combining this pressure of workload with lack of training and underlying fear leads to an environment where the presumption is that a child with disabilities will not flourish, so effort is not made to create a different outcome.

The apparent lack of human resource in providing support to students with disabilities is also reflected in a lack of material resources. Lack of equipment that can create accessible learning such as hearing loops, white boards and information technology, and a heavy reliance on *ad hoc* donations of items undermines the potential for sustained and appropriate education and does not allow for students to receive education which fully meets their needs.

The inability of families to be signposted towards further information resources is indicative of two factors – the absence of significant information resource available within Belize and the lack of awareness amongst teachers as to where to direct students with disabilities and their families.

Providing #Education4All

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND?



The solution

In order to ensure that children and young people with disabilities are able to access the education they need there are a series of fundamental developments which need to take place.

- For an enhanced culture of care towards individuals with disabilities within the Belizean education sector
- For education professionals to have greater awareness of the needs and abilities of pupils with disabilities and the skill to be able to engage, inspire and support them to learn
- For parents and families of children with disabilities to have a full understanding of the potential they have and recognition of how their children can build knowledge and skills to lead an empowered and productive life
- For a greater understanding of the support needs and barriers to access which are experienced by children and young people with disabilities to be present in policy making and education service development and delivery

During the consultation it was clear that where these foundations are in place, the experience of children and young people with disabilities in accessing education is considerably enhanced.

At the heart of the expectations of children and young people with disabilities and their families are:

- Engagement with education professionals who are prepared to build relationships and work to achieve a pupil's full potential
- Active consideration of the ways in which education provision can be adjusted to specific needs

While the fundamental developments outlined above require long term strategic action, more immediate actions can take place which will improve access to education for children and young people with disabilities.

Key recommendations

1. Accessibility study focusing on both physical and cultural accessibility of schools in Belize, with the report to include recommendations and training required as to how schools can create accessible environments for children with disabilities
2. Special Education Needs training to be embedded in all teacher training so that all teachers have a foundation in special needs prior to working in the classroom
3. A mandatory Special Education Needs element to be included within ongoing CPD requirements for qualified and practising teachers
4. Development of an online disability information platform for teachers and families, where best practice, resources and information can be shared
5. Schools to have a clear and transparent communication framework for families and teachers starting from enrolment throughout the child's time at school, including tools that a child with a disability and their family can use alongside the teacher to help the teacher get to know the child ahead of them starting school.
6. Additional learning support for teachers present in classes where there is a child or children with disabilities
7. Disability awareness workshops to be delivered to all school and administrative staff
8. Workshops on inclusion and leadership to be delivered to school leaders
9. Annual disability awareness campaign to be launched within all schools

10. Development of anti-bullying framework for school and strategies and tools to promote and support the reduction of bullying.
11. A review of the teacher training programmes to ensure:
 - a. a child-centred approach is embedded in all elements of the training
 - b. teachers are supported to develop the skills and resources to deliver teaching and assessment in a variety of ways to meets the needs and abilities of students
12. Development of a framework, strategy and resources to support children with disabilities through transitions within their education career
13. Development of a national framework and resources to support individualised learning for children with disabilities
14. Self-advocacy platform, framework and toolkit for children and young people with disabilities within schools to promote and raise self-esteem, confidence and advocacy skills

What Realize will do

In undertaking this report we acknowledge the responsibility to play an active role in creating the changes which individuals with disabilities and their families expect. Equally clear is that the solution to accessing education for all lies not in the response of one organisation, but in the collaboration between multiple stakeholders.

In response to the needs expressed in this report, Realize aims to:

1. Work to promote, support and advise on the inclusion of special educational needs training within teacher training programmes.
2. Development of an online disability information platform for teachers and families
3. Work alongside the Ministry of Education to support schools to have a clear and transparent communication framework for families and teachers starting from enrolment throughout the child's time at school
4. Work alongside key stakeholders to develop a *Starting School* resource pack for teachers and families, this will include:
 - a. Develop a child-friendly, accessible resource that a child with a disability and their family can use with the teacher to help the teacher get to know the child ahead of them starting school
 - b. A training workshop for teachers on welcoming and supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in their class
 - c. A workshop for families on how to prepare and support your child so they are school-ready
5. Create an online disability awareness and inclusion course for education professionals
6. Work alongside key stakeholders to:
 - a. Establish a framework, strategies and resources to tackle bullying
 - b. Establish a framework, strategies and resources to address transitions
 - c. Develop resources to promote and support individualised learning

"The teachers need to accept my child."

right of a
child



Building inclusion through unity

The challenge of building fully inclusive education provision in Belize is one which requires collaboration across all stakeholders – government bodies, public institutions, NGOs, professionals, the community at large, and most importantly individuals with disabilities and their parents and carers.

There are several recommendations above which would benefit most from the input of a range of organisations in the following areas:

- Professional development and training

The opportunity to integrate inclusive approaches into all areas of professional qualification and development related to education should be explored. Both pre-qualification and continuing professional development provides chances for understanding and exploration of educational practices related to inclusion, and these should be fully explored by the institutions which lead education training in Belize.

- Community awareness raising

A coordinated approach to building understanding in the broad community around the needs, aspirations and ambitions of individuals with disabilities is the only way in which a consistent and impactful message can be shared. All stakeholders should engage on a communication strategy which brings together the strengths of each organisation to build a united campaign of awareness raising around disability.

- Development of an education policy to provide clear guidelines to build inclusive education

While policy decisions lie with government institutions, these should be developed in partnership with civil society. In the absence of progress on policy, the organisations outside of government should advocate consistently for improved structures, frameworks and approaches.

- Recognition of best practice

Where inclusion is being successfully considered, it is imperative that the community of stakeholders recognises and rewards this. A coordinated group of partners which acts as a platform to give benchmark and credit, whether through awards, quality marks or other forms of recognition, should take a role in congratulating where it is due, and in the process highlight successes and the opportunity for more progress to be made.

A coordinated voice for all organisations, groups and individuals who seek to build change in the lives of individuals with disabilities is required to make the significant changes which are necessary take place. In closing this report, we call on all parties who seek inclusion for person with disabilities to join together in a common forum for action which can create sustainable and permanent changes.

References

- ¹ Article 28, the Convention of the Rights of the Child
- ² Article 29, the Convention of the Rights of the Child
- ³ Belizean Education and Training Act, 2010
- ⁴ Belizean Families and Children Act
- ⁵ UNESCO, *Role of Education*
- ⁶ UN, *Sustainable Development Goals*
- ⁷ UNESCO, *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education*, 2009
- ⁸ UNICEF, *The right of children with disabilities to education*, 2012
- ⁹ Belize Census, 2000
- ¹⁰ ECLAC 2011, Belize
- ¹¹ Situational Analysis of Children with Disabilities, 2013, UNICEF Belize
- ¹² Belize Families And Children Act
- ¹³ International Disability Rights Monitor Report of the Americas 2004,
- ¹⁴ The Regional Partnership for Children with Disabilities conference report, 2016
- ¹⁵ World Bank, National Education Profile, 2014



www.realizebelize.org



@realizebelize

© 2018

Realize is registered as a not-for-profit organisation in Belize (registration no. 16681) and as a charity in England & Wales (registration no. 1171695)