



Innovations in Education

Helping children with disabilities access education in Vietnam

A little-known problem

Understanding the needs of disabled children has been a difficult task for educators worldwide. In Vietnam, as late as 1996, many disabled children were unable to go to school because of a lack of support -- both from schools and from the community.

Improving access and equity for vulnerable people such as disabled children has been a strategic priority for CRS' work in the education sector. To help children in Vietnam, CRS launched a pilot project in 1996, at a time when the most widely held view was that such a project might work in more developed countries, but not in Vietnam.

After more than ten years of operation, including three grants from the United States Agency for International Development, a dramatic transformation has occurred. The "Inclusion of Vietnamese with Disabilities" project has improved understanding about disabilities on all



Yen Mo Tu commune primary school, Ninh Binh province. Photo: Sean Sprague for CRS

levels: from individual families to policy makers at the national level. In the provinces where CRS has concentrated its work, at least 70% of children with disabilities are in school, a figure the government set as a national target for 2010.

Beginning with community engagement

Overcoming the challenges of getting a child with disabilities into school is more than just a matter of rearranging things within the school. CRS therefore intensively engages the community in providing a web of support. This translates to a more inclusive environment for children with disabilities created by everyone concerned: teachers, local officials, community leaders and organizations, schools, social service providers, the children's parents and their peers.

"Awareness activities are the very foundation of all the inclusive education programming," says Mr. Nguyen Thanh Binh of Luong Son Department of Education and Training. Such activities mobilize community interest and discussion about the needs of children with disabilities. Speaking about her school, Mrs. Vu Thi Xuan, the Director of Phuong Dong Preschool in Uong Bi District, confirmed this. "We had to work very hard to get the parents of non-disabled children to understand why children with disabilities needed to be included in the classroom. Once they understood how beneficial it was for not only the children with disabilities, but for their own children, they actively supported the program."

One of the most successful aspects of the program is the use of resources within the community. To help support



13-year-old Pham Thi Bich Ngoc, who suffers from cerebral palsy, is integrated into a class of 11-year-olds. Ngoc's mother comes to collect her after school. Photo: Sean Sprague for CRS

children with disabilities in their education and integration into the community, CRS started the Circle of Friends. This is a peer group made up of students who study well and live close to the disabled child. They volunteer to help with assignments inside as well as outside of the classroom. By working together, the Circle of Friends helps a child with disabilities succeed in school and breaks down barriers to their full participation in the community.

Developing crucial human resources

Naturally, teachers are critical to the success of the program. When CRS began to work in inclusive education in Vietnam, there were only a few Vietnamese experts with specialized training in this area. Several of these pioneers, under the leadership of the National Institute of Educational Strategy and Curriculum, became CRS' key partners in the early stages of the program. CRS invited international experts to conduct training for national, provincial, and local education staff in Vietnam. This core group then trained classroom teachers in identification, early intervention, and inclusive methodologies. Teachers now feel more confident about using their new skills in the classroom.

Some teachers were supported to enroll in master's degree programs in Vietnam and abroad, while others took part in overseas study tours. According to Ms. Le Minh Ha, director of preschool education at the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), "Before the project started, we did not have good models for how a program in inclusive education could be run. The international study tours have greatly improved the capacity of staff to have a vision and the tools to implement inclusive education."

Making inclusive education a national priority

The final critical piece of the program has been ensuring that all of the advances made in inclusive education for children with disabilities are institutionalized within the MOET and provincial education departments. Because of CRS' advocacy and outreach activities, inclusive education practices are now being used in schools and communities in all 64 provinces of the country.

CRS has also published a series of books and other forms of educational material about disability identification, classroom activities,



Despite her severe physical disability, Ngoc is quite intelligent and is able to write with a computer, and surf the internet! Photo: Sean Sprague for CRS

pedagogical strategies and specific types of disability. Teachers praise the high quality of these materials and say they provide clear step-by-step guidance on working with students.

Sharing the benefits widely

The most important impact of the project has been on the lives of the children themselves. Children with mild and moderate disabilities are keeping up with their peers. Children with the most severe disabilities, who were isolated in the past, are able to achieve more through contact with other children and adults. Nationally, MOET has found that 25% of the one million Vietnamese children with disabilities are attending school.

Based on the experience in Vietnam, and with similar CRS programs in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, India and Serbia, CRS strongly believes that it is not just children with disabilities who benefit from more inclusive communities. Families become connected to supportive social networks. Teachers are introduced to concepts of individualized education plans and diversified methods of teaching that benefit all children. And communities become more open minded, creating a more favorable environment for people with disabilities in the future.