



VESP

**VANUATU EDUCATION
SUPPORT PROGRAM**

Primary school in Vanuatu: Gendered expectations, roles and results

September 2021

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Ministry of Education & Training
Government of Vanuatu



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Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
CWD	Children with disability
DFAT	Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EFA	Education for All
GoV	Government of Vanuatu
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
Open VEMIS	Open Vanuatu Education Management Information System
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer program
Tetra Tech	Tetra Tech International Development Pty Ltd
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VANSTA	Vanuatu National Standardised Test of Achievement
VESP II	Vanuatu Education Support Program II
WHO	World Health Organization

Foreword

The mission of the Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) is to provide access to quality education for all our students. We recognise that education forms the foundation for a prosperous economy and is the right of every child, regardless of gender, ability or religion. However, educational data reveals disparities between boys and girls in enrolment, completion and educational achievement. For example, although more boys than girls initially enrol in school, a significantly higher number of boys drop out, especially after year 6. Unfortunately, data on children with disability in the school system is limited, indicating a need for more insights into our student population.

Recent data indicates positive changes in gender equality and education. Over recent decades, substantial progress has been made in addressing low levels for girls, resulting in nearly equal numbers of girls and boys enrolling in primary school. However, new challenges have emerged, with boys appearing to lag. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effecting change.

Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, commits us to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. This report, based on research conducted by MoET, contributes to enhancing our understanding of the relationship between children's gender and their schooling. This understanding will assist policy makers, education specialists, principals, teachers, parents, and carers better support students to fully benefit from their educational journey.

I wish to express my gratitude to all the staff of MoET, as well as the schools, students, and community members who dedicated their time and efforts to develop this significant study.



Mr. Bergmans Iati

Director General

Ministry of Education and Training

Executive Summary

Through the Vanuatu Education Support Program II (VESP), the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) developed this study to understand better how gender affects children's primary school experience. This report, *Primary school in Vanuatu: Gendered expectations, roles and results*, is a part of Vanuatu's commitment to providing access to quality primary education for all (EFA) children. It recognizes that gender differences, norms and values significantly shape children's participation, well-being and achievements in primary school and beyond. The study also sought to understand how disability affects girls' and boys' primary education.

The study comes as recognition grows that gender inequality in schools has changed. In the past 20 years, girls' primary school enrolment has nearly reached parity with boys in many countries¹ (United Nations Children's Fund – UNICEF, 2020), including Vanuatu. Still, there is more to do to ensure that more girls complete secondary school. In some countries, girls outperform boys in schools. Still, gender inequality persists, with girls remaining less confident and less likely to pursue careers than boys (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015).

This report presents the perspectives and experiences of women, men, girls and boys in six school communities across Shefa and Tafea provinces, complemented by information from an analysis of the Ministry of Education's key datasets to explore insights beyond the statistics. The analysis of MoET's quantitative data through a gender lens was undertaken in 2020. The research for the qualitative study was undertaken in March and April 2021. It included interviews and focus group discussions with people working in primary education, community leaders and organisations, parents and carers, and girls and boys in primary school.

The study contributes to the outcomes of VESP II for access and inclusion, which is part of MoET's program to strengthen the primary education system across Vanuatu and receives support from the Australian aid program.

Key findings

The study used differences between girls' and boys' enrolment and retention in primary school as an entry point to ask questions about how students' gender affects their schooling. MoET data shows a relatively slight gap between boys and girls – in 2019/2020, 32% of boys dropped out of school in Year 6 compared to 28% of girls, while more boys were enrolled in school for every year of primary school (VESP II, 2020, p5). The proportion of children out of school is high for both boys and girls, so it is important to understand why girls do not stay in school.

Study participants described 11 key areas affecting children's enrolment and retention in school. In speaking about how these issues affect girls and boys, they showed how expectations around girls' and boys' roles and behaviour influence children both in and outside school. For example, boys are widely reported to behave badly and have negative attitudes to schooling compared to girls. This out-of-school perception results in boys being on the receiving end of discipline in school, making it more likely that they will skip school.

¹ UNICEF states that four out of five girls complete primary school but only two of five complete upper secondary school, p13

The table below shows the 11 areas that affect children’s enrolment and retention in school.

Table 1: Areas affecting children’s enrolment and retention in school

Out-of-school factors	In-school factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child attitudes and behaviour • Community attitudes and customs • Lack of parental support, including conflict at home • Food and nutrition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline in school • Results in school • Bullying and fighting • School resources and teacher quality • Travel and distance from home to school • Language of instruction • Costs and paperwork

Gender differences were considered to play a greater role in a child’s retention in school than in their enrolment. While it was seen as more important to sign boys up for school than girls in the past, there is a sense that this is changing. However, regarding progressing through years and remaining in school, respondents felt gender had a significant role. Children’s attitudes and behaviour, custom and culture, discipline in school and school results were seen to be particularly gendered issues.

The bar charts below illustrate the themes raised by adult participants in order of prevalence in discussions of enrolment and retention, respectively.² Regarding enrolment, barriers were predominantly considered similar for boys and girls. These were issues such as the cost and paperwork associated with enrolment. In discussions concerning retention (children’s progress through school), gender became significantly more prominent. The darker coloured bars represent in-school factors, such as infrastructure, while lighter coloured bars refer to factors outside the school’s control, such as community attitudes.

Throughout the study, gender bias and stereotyping influenced insights about the motivations and actions of boys and girls, reflecting societal divisions in expectations around roles and behaviours associated with being male and female in Vanuatu. Overall, boys are seen to be difficult, and girls are seen as good in school. This perception contrasts with community attitudes outside of school, where, as one respondent said, ‘boys are kings’.

² The figures do not reference the issue of bullying and fighting, which was raised almost exclusively by nearly all children. When adults mentioned the issue, it was in the context of children’s attitudes and behaviour.

Figure 1: Barriers to enrolment for both girls and boys

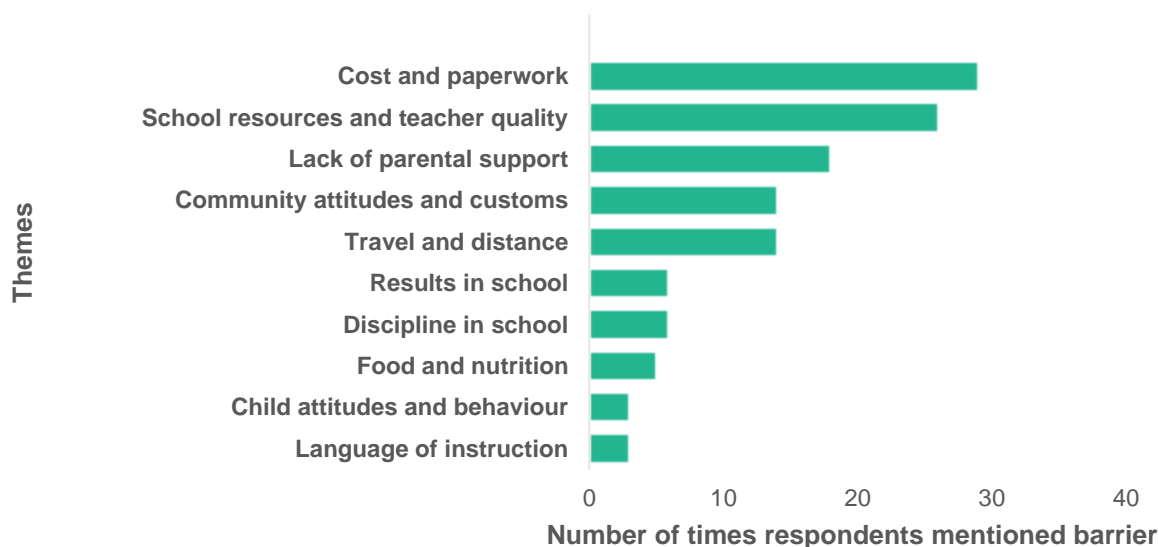
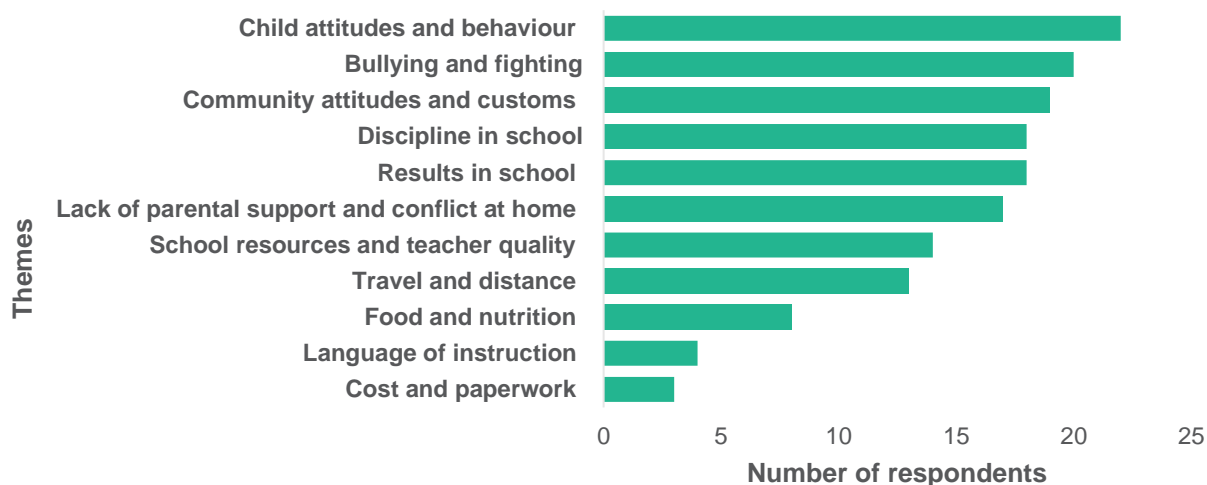


Figure 2: Challenges undermining retention that affect girls and boys differently



In sharing their views, study participants showed that:

- Gender has a less obvious influence on children’s enrolment in school than it does on children’s retention.
- There is growing recognition that girls and boys should both attend school, but this is still new. Traditionally, girls’ education was considered less important than boys; there is also a link between girls’ strong performance in school and greater support for them to stay in school.
- The most cited challenges affecting children’s enrolment are the cost and paperwork associated with signing up to school; concerns around school infrastructure, resources and teachers; and parents’ inability to support children’s education due to their capabilities, financial situation or attitudes to schooling.

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- The most cited challenges affecting retention were children's attitudes and behaviour, bullying and fighting, custom and culture, discipline (often physical) and school results. All were seen to be different for girls and boys.
- Boys' attitudes to education and behaviour at school are seen to be poor compared to girls', resulting in increased numbers of drop-outs, students repeating classes and bad academic results. They are linked with different attitudes and expectations around boys' behaviour at home and in the community.
- Bullying and fighting between children is the number one problem at school for both boys and girls, with boys predominantly the perpetrators and both girls and boys as targets.
- As adults and students reported, corporal punishment is commonly experienced or witnessed by children. The punishment is delivered by teachers and principals using rulers, brooms or sticks. There is a link between boys' poor behaviour and the level of discipline they experience.

The study's findings on children's experience of violence are disturbing. Children are experiencing physical violence from teachers, principals, family and each other, affecting their attitude to school. Adverse childhood experiences at school can cause lifelong trauma and undermine education and gender equality. The level of violence in primary schools demands action.

The study also highlighted the significance of custom on children's primary education, with specific findings around boys' roles as cultural custodians and the time they need out of school for rituals. The time required to fulfil cultural obligations can significantly affect boys' retention and performance at school. Girls' roles as carers for younger siblings, their early marriage and rituals around the onset of puberty also undermine girls' school enrolment and retention. Still, girls' puberty-related issues were less obvious in this study compared to the time taken by boys in primary school, particularly for circumcision ceremonies.

Several further findings demand new thinking, particularly regarding the following:

- Travel for seasonal work, including the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, is seen to split families, undermine support for children's education and promote a view that education is irrelevant to future employment, particularly among boys.
- Boys' attitudes are influenced by fathers' and community attitudes and peer pressure. This drives poor performance and dropping out among boys in school.

School communities offered numerous ideas for addressing the challenges of building stronger links between families and schools, integrating culture and schooling, supporting better management, and improving infrastructure and teaching. Fundamental to many of these is the question of resources.

The study found limited information on the differences between the issues faced by girls and boys with disability. These differences need specific research that includes questions and methods that are fully inclusive of girls and boys with a disability. The study included questions on disability, invited participation from children with a disability and their carers, and interviewed representatives from a disabled people's organization. Responses showed the need for continued investment in efforts to build teacher skills and school resources that address the needs of children with disability (CWD). Overall, continued investment in and support for girls and boys with disability is needed by parents, teachers and children, as the challenges are so large.

As well as detailing barriers to enrolling and progressing through school, parents and carers explained why they wanted their children to have a primary school education. Their reasons and participation in the study show a commitment to Vanuatu's children and the education system. The key reasons identified by parents for enrolling students in school included the opportunity for their children to have a 'positive future', location and proximity to the school, employment opportunities for their children, access to religious and spiritual education, bilingual learning opportunities and behaviour management. The drive to enrol also comes directly from some children who ask to go to school. Many teachers and principals participating in the study demonstrated the same commitment. While

the study encountered some criticism of teachers, it also found children who like and admire their teachers and say they motivate them to go to school.

Looking ahead

The study indicates that decisive action is needed to shift entrenched challenges undermining children's safety and gender equality in Vanuatu's primary schools. MoET is working (i) to improve teacher training and thereby enhance the quality and inclusiveness of education and (ii) to provide better infrastructure and strengthen links with parents, carers and communities through VESP and other initiatives. However, some areas urgently demand a stronger response and new thinking. These include the following:

- Physical violence in schools: Corporal punishment by teachers and bullying among children undermines child safeguarding principles, provides poor models for behaviour and perpetuates violence and gender inequality.
- Fragile support for girls' education: The gap between girls' and boys' enrolment is improving, but girls' education is still linked to their gender roles as carers, not leaders, and support for girls' education is still new. Continued effort is needed to maintain and strengthen gains in girls' education.
- The relationship between custom and education: There is a need to recognize and respond to the impact of customs and culture on schooling. MoET and communities should explore ways schools can work with and around custom.
- Children's behaviour and stereotyping: In recognising that stereotyping exacerbates division, civil society, communities and educators should pursue effective approaches that address boys' specific behaviours and attitudes that undermine educational outcomes.

While this report emphasizes significant challenges undermining gender equality in primary education, it also offers a hopeful story of families, government educators and children committed to improving primary education in Vanuatu. As well as reporting on problems, participants provided data showing that many families overcome significant difficulties in sending girls and boys to school and do so because of the benefits they see in both girls and boys receiving an education.

While many primary aged students still do not attend school, the number of all children in primary school has grown. MoET's figures show that between 2012 and 2019, the primary Net Enrolment Rate (NER) increased from 86% to 96%. The enrolment gap between girls and boys stands at 96.5% NER for boys and 95.7% NER for girls. In 2020, 3,365 more boys were enrolled in Vanuatu's primary schools than girls (VESP II, 2020, pp12-13). The parents, community leaders, educators and children who provided the data for this research demonstrated their support for primary education by providing thoughtful and considered responses to questions about primary education, gender and primary school in Vanuatu. The result is a rich set of findings reflecting Vanuatu's unique context that government, educators and communities can use to provide a quality for all children.

1 Introduction

VESP's Gender in Primary Education Study was conducted by MoET through the VESP II program from 2020 – June 2021. The study is part of the VESP II, which is a MoET program that aims to strengthen the primary education system across Vanuatu and achieve the goals of both the Ministry's education sector strategy and the Vanuatu Education and Training Sector Strategy.

VESP II began in January 2019, following a successful phase 1 from 2013-2018. The program is funded by the Australian aid program and is the Ministry's largest development partner activity. VESP II has three priority areas of work: (i) improving education outcomes through a focus on school-community partnerships (access), (ii) improving teaching and learning, including school leadership (quality), and (iii) overall management (institutional and provincial support).

This report, *Primary school in Vanuatu: Gendered expectations, roles and results*, details the findings of qualitative research conducted from January – June 2021 and builds on a statistical analysis of key MoET datasets from 2015 to 2020 undertaken by VESP II in 2020. The research is part of VESP II's work to build an evidence base for understanding how children's experience of primary education is affected by gender. It advances VESP II's commitment to inclusive education for children of all genders and abilities, which is a critical component of improving access to education. The study contributes to the Government of Vanuatu's (GoV) commitment to ensuring a quality EFA children in the country. It also aligns with the Government of Australia's commitment to promoting gender equality in Vanuatu and the Asia-Pacific. The study also allowed key staff from VESP II and MoET to build their research skills by participating in research training, collecting data and preparing and presenting findings.

The study provides information that will be useful as MoET reviews policies for child safeguarding, gender equality and disability inclusion within education. It documents useful insights for policy makers and education stakeholders, drawing on statistical data and the voices of teachers, principals, parents, community members, and boys and girls. The report's authors hope their findings and recommendations can assist decision makers in Vanuatu's education sector develop effective policies that promote gender equality and social inclusion in Vanuatu's school system.

2 Study methodology

2.1 Study purpose and scope

This study was conducted to inform planning and actions to promote gender equality and inclusive education by capturing evidence of how gender issues affect children's experience of primary school. The study was undertaken in two parts:

- Part 1 involved the consolidation and analysis of MoET statistical data.
- Part 2 collected rich qualitative data exploring the drivers of differences in boys' and girls' participation in and experience of primary school.

Part 1 of the study analysed data from the results of the MoET Annual Statistical Reports, Open Vanuatu Education Management Information System (Open VEMIS) and Vanuatu National Standardised Test of Achievement (VANSTA). The analysis explored the relationship between a range of factors, including trends related to gender. Specifically, the gendered factors assessed were enrolment, retention and progression, and performance in VANSTA at national and Provincial levels. The report analysed data against 12 task areas, listed in full in Annex C. The analysis has been fully documented in a separate report, *VESP Analysis of Education Data: A Gender Perspective* (VESP II, 2020), which is a valuable source of information for planning purposes and is [available on request](#).

Part 2 of the study consisted of a series of interviews and focus group discussions in two provinces (Shefa and Tafea) undertaken in March and April 2021. It is the primary focus of this report. The two parts of the study were linked at the design and analysis phases. Research questions for the interviews were designed with reference to the statistical data, and the final analysis drew on findings from the quantitative and qualitative studies. The Part 2 qualitative study drew on insights collected from six schools in communities with a range of characteristics. Data was collected from a wide range of male and female informants interested in their communities and schools, and male and female students.

The audience for this research is MoET, the Australian aid program, the VESP II program and other education stakeholders working to promote a safe and equitable primary education system for girls and boys in Vanuatu. It is also developed for those working to promote gender equality within Vanuatu, given primary education's key role in preparing girls and boys for further education, workplace opportunities and establishing gender dynamics. Findings from the research may be shared with the relevant ministries in Vanuatu, international partners and organisations active in the education sector. They may be presented at conferences and published in journals or online.

2.2 Qualitative Study Research Questions

The specific objective of the qualitative component of the study is to explore how children's gender affects their enrolment and retention in primary school. This study is a descriptive research that documents and highlights information for use in policy making and teaching.

For the qualitative aspect of the study, 'enrolment' is the act of officially registering as a student at a particular school. This most commonly refers to enrolment in kindergarten but also covers enrolment in a new school over subsequent years. 'Retention' refers to children's ongoing participation in and progress through school, with the overall goal of progressing through years annually. It is important to note that these definitions were not technically pure in the data collection, as most of informants are not sector-specialists and spoke more generally about reasons for girls and boys coming to and staying in school. This was not the case for the quantitative analysis, which draws on the statistics collected using formalised government standards and terms.

The study team elected to focus on enrolment and retention as the entry point for exploring gendered differences in girls' and boys' primary schooling because the quantitative data indicated that, although more boys enrol in school, their journey through school is notably more uneven than girls. At a national level, more boys are enrolled than girls throughout primary school. However, while the enrolment figures for girls and boys drop for each school year, boys repeat classes more, perform worse in VANSTA and are less likely to progress to secondary school (VESP II, 2020, p16).

To guide the interviews with the broad range of community stakeholders involved, the study team developed three research questions to explore opposing trends, suggestions and expectations that might inform policy responses to problems identified.

The three key research questions are:

1. What factors inside and outside school contribute to differences between boys' and girls' enrolment in kindergarten and subsequent years of primary school?
2. What factors inside and outside schools influence the differences in boys' and girls' retention (staying in school and progress between years)?
3. What can schools and MoET do to address these challenges in the short and long term?

The questions were tested through a stakeholder consultation meeting on 5 February 2020 involving government and civil society organisations working in the Vanuatu education sector.³ They formed the basis for the tools used to guide interviews and group discussions.

³ Organisations represented at the workshop (5 February 2021) included UNICEF Vanuatu, World Vision in Vanuatu, Save the Children Vanuatu, DFAT, Vanuatu MoET and VESP

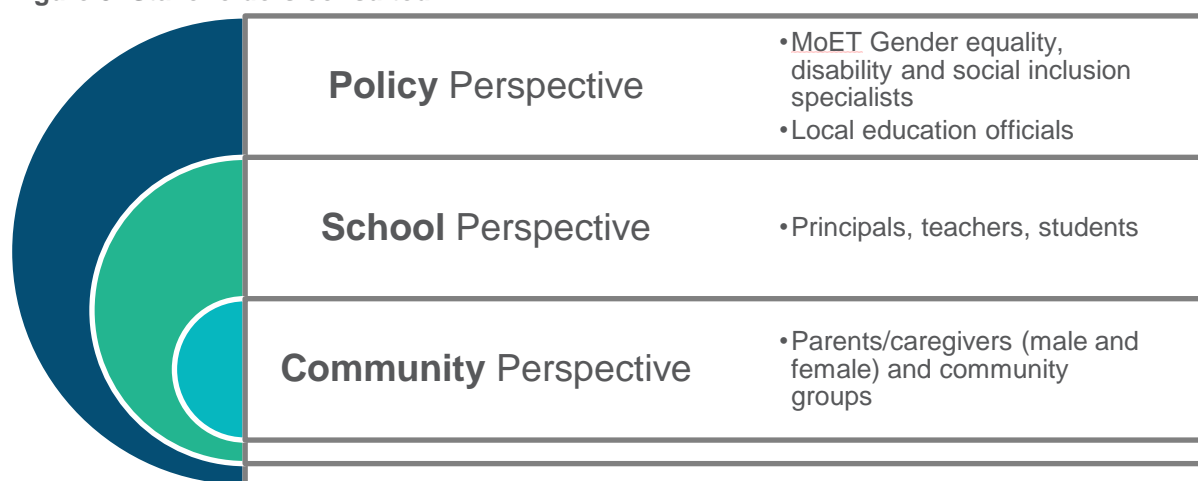
2.3 Sampling: Who did we ask?

2.3.1 Study participants – whole-of-community perspective

The study was designed to develop a detailed picture that reflects the realities of the lived experience of those using and working within the primary education system in the community. The study, therefore, identified the stakeholder groups who interact directly with the system as users (students, parents and caregivers, and the broader community), those involved in delivering primary education and those with a perspective on community and education policy. Figure 3 below outlines the groups consulted. It is important to note that stakeholders' perspectives were also classified according to gender and sex-disaggregated data.

The study sought to include the perspectives of community members and students living with a disability by inviting participants with experience of disability to participate in interviews and discussions. Also, discussion guides included questions specifically about disability. No children with a disability joined the research directly. The study also interviewed representatives from the Vanuatu Society for People with Disability. A full list of stakeholder groups who shared their views and insights is included in Annex 1.

Figure 3: Stakeholders consulted



2.3.2 Study Sample – locations for data collection

The study was conducted across six school communities in two provinces of Vanuatu. Sites were chosen for their diversity so that a range of factors that affect boys' and girls' participation in primary school could be explored.

The sampling strategy and the decision to select a small number of schools were influenced by the social complexity of gender equality in education in Vanuatu. Such complexity makes replicating conditions from one context to the next impossible. Instead, it finds value in highlighting the trends and drivers that are a 'red flag' for education leaders and communities to monitor and respond to. Therefore, the qualitative study emphasises the validity of participants' perspectives rather than proposing a generalised formula for gender equal education drawn from many sites. This approach aligns with Patton's Purposeful Sampling Principles (Patton, 2015).

The study team used MoET data to select the provinces of Shefa and Tafea, which sit at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding school performance. Shefa, with approximately 95 schools in 2019, is ranked first among the six provinces in terms of VANSTA results. Tafea, with 78 schools in 2019, ranks fifth of six provinces (VESP II, 2020). The provinces offered diverse sites and were accessible within the study’s resources. The criteria for selecting the study sites were chosen according to the statistical analysis and literature review. The study aimed for a sample where factors of interest are active, such as those that appear to influence school enrolment and retention. These criteria included a variety of enrolment and retention trends at the school level, VANSTA performance, distance and remoteness of schools, experience of natural disaster, presence of CWD, the language of instruction and school type (primary, primary and middle school). For further details, see Table 2 below.

Table 2: Criteria for the selection of schools

Characteristic	Application
Enrolment and retention trends	Majority in line with national trends; at least one outlier (but no more than one per province)
Urban, rural and remote rural communities (distance from province centre)	The study includes one school in each provincial centre, one school in a rural community, and one school considered remote from the provincial centre. ⁴ It is assumed that this will also generate a range of characteristics regarding access to schools, infrastructure levels and socio-economic conditions in the community.
Vulnerable to/affected by natural disasters	The study will include at least one school in each province affected by a disaster in the past three years.
Boys and girls with disability enrolled/progressing through school	At least one school in each province includes boys and/or girls with a disability
School performance in VANSTA (primary level)	A range of VANSTA performance outcomes across the six schools.
School type	Sample to include schools to primary and junior high Francophone and Anglophone schools.

⁴ The study defines rural area schools as small and located some distance (approximately 8 km) outside urbanized area; remote area schools are located further from urbanized areas and lack educational resources due to a range of factors, such as poor transportation, poor internet access, challenging social-economic conditions.

2.4 Collecting and analysing data: tools, process and approach

2.4.1 Data collection

Data was collected by a research team of two male and two female education sector staff drawn from the VESP II Program and MoET. Their focus areas included inclusive education, child safeguarding, gender equality and policy planning. The researchers participated in a 2.5-day training workshop with the Australia-based VESP II study team leader and a VESP II supported research adviser. The workshop covered the fundamentals of conducting research, ethics, confidentiality, working with children and child protection. The study benefited significantly from the team's cultural and sectoral knowledge. Members participated strongly in finalising the tools and procedures for working with the different stakeholder groups for the study.

Data collection occurred face-to-face in Tafea province from 29 March to 1 April 2021 and in Shefa province from 7 to 9 April 2021. Overall, 79 interviews and group discussions were undertaken. One interview with a key informant was conducted by telephone. Groups were separated according to gender. Researchers worked in pairs and recorded sessions. These were later developed into typed summaries and shared electronically. Each interview and group discussion started with an introduction and discussion of consent, including a commitment to ensure confidentiality. Parents and carers were invited to share their consent for children's participation prior to the research to ensure children had permission to participate.

Data collected with children used a participatory, child-friendly approach, encouraging children to draw and explain their images about what they liked and disliked about school. The children were also asked to confirm they were happy to participate at the start of the sessions.

2.4.2 Analysis of data

The VESP II study team leader and adviser in Australia conducted the data analysis, with the research team validating the initial findings. nVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organise and sort data into themes, while the team drew on its expertise in inclusive education, gender and education in Vanuatu to interpret and frame findings. The analysis also drew on interpretivist and feminist research (Punch, 2014), recognising that researchers and research participants are influenced by their personal values, experience and knowledge. In the field of gender, participants' understanding of the world is also shaped by the gender norms and power relations within their own experience. Within this report, excerpts from transcripts are presented as quotations. However, they have been filtered through translation and notation and are not purely verbatim. The team is confident the quotations accurately reflect the intended meaning of the original source.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality, findings were de-identified and are predominantly presented in an aggregated form. The procedures for maintaining confidentiality during data collection were included in the training workshop and adopted during the data collection process and ongoing data management. Records of files are stored safely, with access restricted.

Confidentiality protects the research participants, who share judgments and opinions about others that could lead to division and conflict within communities and households if inappropriately shared. It is necessary to ensure confidentiality to protect participants and ensure ongoing constructive relationships between VESP, MoET, and schools.

Research team: The research team was made up of VESP and MoET staff, who brought a strong knowledge of Vanuatu's education sector and an inclusive education perspective. This approach provided a learning opportunity for researchers who had not previously engaged in this form of disciplined inquiry. The risk of participants tailoring their responses due to speaking to government officials was assessed and offset by a strong commitment to respect the confidentiality of participants.

Do No Harm: Guidance developed by The Global Women's Institute and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT, 2018) explains the safety implications of researching violence against women and girls and the potential for compromising the safety of participants and researchers when cases of violence emerge. In line with these principles, the study did not dig into illegal or taboo areas, such as sexual violence, due to a lack of resources to support participants effectively if critical issues arose. Global research indicates that while boys experience higher levels of physical violence, girls are more likely to experience sexual violence, which significantly impacts schooling (EFA et al., 2015). The study was not able to explore this important area.

Child protection concerns: A number of children and adults shared information related to violence against women and specifically violence to children both inside and outside school. In some cases, children volunteered their firsthand experience of violence. The study is bound by MoET's Child Safeguarding policies. To protect the identity and safety of children reporting against teachers, researchers did not pursue formal reporting. The need to strengthen the Child Safeguarding Policy, particularly its implementation, emerges as an urgent recommendation from the research.

Gender diversity: The study did not explore the question of gender diversity, and binary gender language is used throughout the report. This approach partly reflects the link to the government's quantitative data, which disaggregates data for males and females. Exploring gender using non-binary terms is also sensitive within some Vanuatu cultures.

3 Findings

Description of the schools and communities

As noted earlier, the communities studied presented a wide range of characteristics. To provide some context for the study findings, Table 3 briefly describes the study sites in Shefa and Tafea. It is drawn from descriptions provided by key informants, particularly community leaders and principals, and reflects their opinions and wording.

Table 3: Description of the schools and communities participating in the study

Shefa	Tafea
<p>School 1</p> <p>An urban school facing overcrowding. Children come from far villages and the surrounding area. The church has a strong role in running the school, leading to tension with some community members. There were 246 students, of whom 50% were girls (2021, Open VEMIS).</p> <p>There is a lack of support for education among parents, with many children living with grandmothers. There is a parents teachers association, but it is not active.</p>	<p>School 2</p> <p>An urban school with two men and three women on the school council. In 2021, there were 211 students, 46% of whom were girls (2021, Open VEMIS). Although gender inequality is not considered a problem, there are only 12 girls enrolled in Year 6 compared to 24 boys. Also, the community values boys more than girls and refers to them metaphorically as <i>nambanga</i> (banyan tree), meaning boys provide for the family's needs.</p> <p>There is a high rate of children enrolled, but many transfer to other schools. The school is surrounded by churches that support the school's development.</p> <p>Some parents, particularly mothers, are actively supportive. However, a recent attempt to establish a parents teachers association was unsuccessful. Only mothers support school activities; most men travel for seasonal work under the RSE.⁵</p> <p>Attitudes towards gender equality are changing, with parents increasingly feeling it is worth investing in girls.</p>

⁵ For further information about the impact of the Recognised Seasonal Employer program, see [RSE Impact Study: Synthesis Report \(immigration.govt.nz\)](#), 2020.

Shefa

School 3

The remote school supports four communities, the furthest being 2 km away. In 2021 there were 96 students, of whom 45% were girls (2021, Open VEMIS). There is little support for school or education for children among parents, many of whom are uneducated or have completed only primary school. Most households earn their livelihoods by selling produce at the local markets.

Local custom promotes the view that a man is the chief and all women are a man's responsibility. Only women are involved in school activities.

The community successfully negotiated with a company to provide a new classroom, and there is a 'second-chance club' for children who have dropped out of school. A portion of parents conduct some fundraising and recently implemented an initiative to improve the school's fence.

Tafea

School 4

Custom is very strong around the remote school, which serves five communities. Some community members are concerned that boys will forget their customs and cultural identity if they succeed at school. Arranged marriage remains an important custom. In 2021 there were 72 students, of whom 61% were girls. (2021, Open VEMIS).

There is tension around the role of the Seventh Day Adventist church in the school. There is little parental support for the school and no parents teachers association in place. Children are often not fed before school.

More than 100 students are in school this year, but many more children in the area do not attend. There are problems with late registration for children in years 1-3. Class 6 has three girls and nine boys.

Teachers (untrained) are hardworking but are poorly paid. Due to insufficient classrooms, multi-class teaching is common.

While the community places men in charge of women, the teachers seek to involve boys and girls equally in all school activities. A number of Informants said some community members value boys above girls while others value girls above boys.

The school was affected by volcanic eruptions and ash in 2020.

Shefa

Tafea

School 5

This rural francophone school needs to improve communication and cooperation with the community. In 2021 there were 66 students, of whom 42% were girls (2021, Open VEMIS). Strong views about women's and men's roles are entrenched through custom and culture. A community organisation involved with the school helps girls learn how to sew, cook and run a meeting. Families in the area have few options for generating income and prioritise livelihoods over education. However, due to COVID-19's socio-economic impacts and ongoing challenges with poverty, some parents see education as an investment in their children's future.

School 6

This rural school has been serving its community for more than four generations. In 2021 there were 175 students, of whom 49% were girls (2021, Open VEMIS). Some children walk 3 km to reach the school. The principal has a strong relationship with the community, but only mothers are involved in school-related work. About half of the school community values education, and both men and women are present at school breakup. Enrolment is increasing.

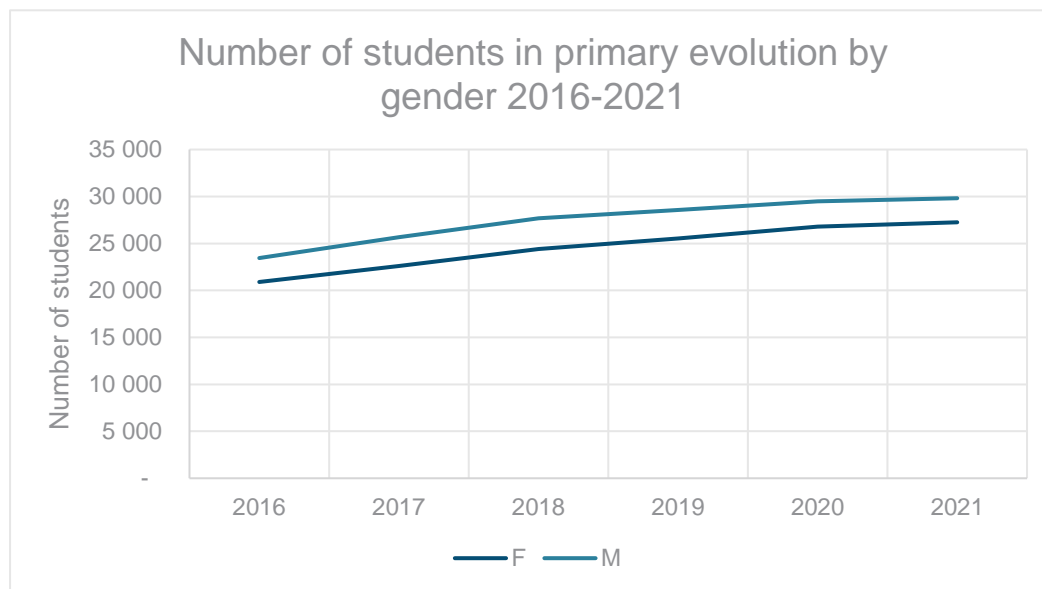
The community's Chief plays a strong role in the community, promoting education and counselling children engaging in harmful behaviour such as drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana.

3.1 Enrolment

What factors inside and outside school contribute to differences between boys’ and girls’ enrolment in kindergarten and subsequent years of primary school?

The overall picture of enrolment in Vanuatu is positive. As shown in Figure 4, an analysis of Open VEMIS⁶ data indicates a steady increase in students enrolled in all years between 2016 and 2021, with more students enrolling in the earlier grades (VESP, 2020). Regarding gender, the Open VEMIS analysis showed that more boys than girls are enrolled in primary school in every year of schooling until secondary school.

Figure 4: Primary school enrolment over time by gender



In exploring why more boys than girls enrol in school, this study asked parents, teachers, principals and community representatives for their perspectives on why children are enrolled or not. It then asked participants to reflect on which issues are different for boys and girls and CWD.

The data below touches briefly on the pull factors that attract families to enrol girls and boys in school. However, most of the findings focus on the barriers. Understanding these challenges is critical to identifying actions likely to improve primary education. It is also valuable to reflect on the positive features raised by parents and community members, which underscore the commitment across all the participating communities to educate girls and boys.

Of the schools participating in the study, one of the remote schools and one of the urban schools had slightly more girls enrolled than boys, according to 2019 Open VEMIS data. The other four schools

⁶ Open VEMIS is the Vanuatu Education Management Information System and refers to statistical data collected by MoET.

had fewer girls enrolled. The details are reflected in Table 4 below. Note that because data on disability is not systematically collected, it is not included here.

Table 4: Enrolment in the schools participating in the study

	Students enrolled	% female
Urban school 1	169	44%
Urban school 2	227	52%
Rural school 1	210	47%
Rural school 2	65	40%
Remote school 1	104	59%
Remote school 2	101	40%

3.1.1 Why enrol children in school?

The key reasons parents identified for enrolling their children in school included:

- Ensuring a positive future
- Being able to contribute to their community and country
- Making good use of the school’s conveniences
- Improving future employment opportunities
- Accessing religious and spiritual education
- Accessing bilingual learning opportunities
- Making use of the school’s behaviour management

Parents expected children to learn about the world around them and study specific subjects. Parents saw the value in children learning skills to speak a range of languages and communicate across different communities. Some parents appreciate schools for their ‘beautiful’ and safe environment. Some families and carers noted that children asked to attend school.

When asked why enrol children at school, the most common response across urban, rural and remote communities was that it enhances their future opportunities and supports them in becoming community leaders. Future employment opportunities were also commonly cited as a reason to enrol children in school. One stakeholder group said parents viewed their children’s education as more important since the emergence of COVID-19, which has created an increasingly unstable employment environment.

Some parents in Tafea said access to government schools and the safe environment schools provide encouraged them to enrol their children. Across Shefa and Tafea, parents highlighted that school facilities such as access to electricity, computer labs, quality toilets and canteens were also reasons to send their children to school. These findings indicate that basic health and sanitation needs and access to food and learning resources may drive enrolment if children do not have them at home. Also, a few stakeholders from rural and remote schools in Shefa and Tafea said that if their children could become bilingual at school by learning French or English, it would enhance their children’s future employment opportunities.

As such, the key factors motivating parents to enrol their children are associated with providing future opportunities for their employment and livelihood. Many stakeholders noted that life is more expensive now and requires stable finances to live a positive life.

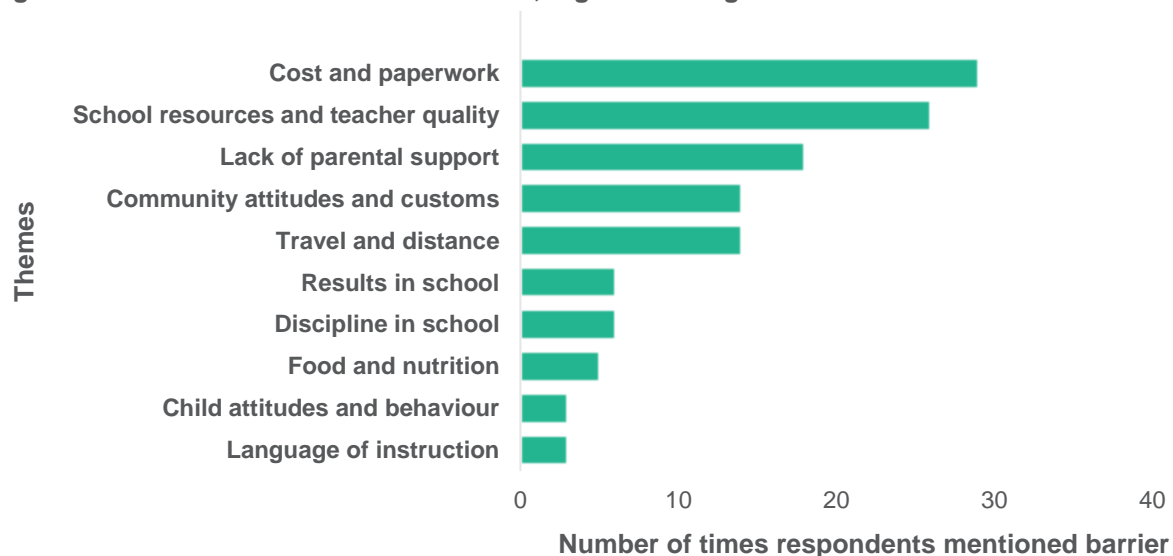
The data did not show if the enrolment drivers differed for boys and girls.

3.1.2 Barriers to enrolment in primary school – all children

The group discussions and individual interviews with adult participants across the schools provided insights that fell into 10 dominant themes. Many of these are connected or overlapping and highlight the multiple factors that impact a child’s experience of and response to primary education – factors that are often beyond the direct control of schools. Participants were asked about the barriers and challenges that affect children enrolling in primary school and how these differ between boys and girls. Their answers were also additionally assessed with a gender lens, considering the gendered implications and high levels of stereotyping in the responses. Participants did not always distinguish between the challenges that might affect enrolment, retention or progress through school. As a result, there is some overlap between these issues in the discussion below.

The themes and their prevalence⁷ in interviews and discussions with adults are presented in Figure 5, ranked from the most to least common responses.

Figure 5: Barriers to enrolment for children, regardless of gender



⁷ This refers to the number of interviews where stakeholders (either individuals or groups) raised the issue.

3.1.2.1 In-school barriers

Costs and documentation

Among 18 interviews and discussions, cost was the primary issue identified across all schools as a barrier to children enrolling. Fundamentally, children will not attend school if families do not have enough money. This is particularly a problem for large families. One of the costs cited was school fees, which vary across schools. One school (remote) charges weekly fees of 100 VATU per child. Other costs include transportation, uniforms, school materials and documents such as birth certificates. At one school, male parents and caregivers queried the purpose of the school grant if it does not cover the cost of stationery for students.

School documentation requirements were also considered onerous and costly. Schools require birth certificates, medical certificates and, where relevant, documents from previous schools. Securing these can present challenges to many parents, as noted by principals, parents and teachers in urban, rural and remote schools. Children cannot officially enrol in school unless these documentation requirements are met. Also, schools cannot include children without birth certificates in school grant applications, which reduces the amount of funding they can access. VESP data indicates that many children attending school have no birth certificates, with up to 80% in one school. (VESP II, 2021).

One group of male parents/caregivers suggested school costs affect girls and boys differently, as fees increase as students progress through school. This is believed to affect girls more than boys because girls are considered more likely to attend the costlier upper and secondary grades.

School environment and resources

Inadequate school resources were noted as a barrier affecting enrolment across all schools. This corresponds with the findings of the 2020 analysis of MoET quantitative data (VESP II, 2020), which showed that children perform better and stay longer in schools with better infrastructure across all primary and secondary school years. The data showed a clear, positive relationship between the proportion of all students continuing to the next year and the school's level of infrastructure. Regardless of the school's infrastructure level, around 3% more girls than boys continue to the next year. This is illustrated in Figure 6 below, based on the data for children progressing through school from 2018 to 2019. As the figure shows, it is 'true' that more children are in the correct school year when the infrastructure score is higher. This ranges from 80.6% of girls in schools with infrastructure scores to 35, down to 71.1% for schools with infrastructure scores up to 20.

In the interviews and discussions, participants noted the problem of limited space, which limits the teacher's ability to provide quality support to children and allows no room for children to play. In one school, each class had more than 40 students, causing teachers to suffer headaches due to the noise. There were not enough classrooms for all children. In the remote schools, poor infrastructure, such as inadequate water supply and a leaking roof, was reported as impeding enrolment.

A further 11 participant groups highlighted problems with teachers. In four remote, rural and urban schools, temporary teachers were often absent on school days, resulting in students not attending school. In addition, trained teachers would not always stay at one rural school, and another reported that only one teacher was available across all years 1-6.

Figure 6: Progression through school related to school infrastructure levels for girls and boys

Schools receive scores for the quality of their infrastructure. The bars in this chart show the percentage of children enrolled in the right year of schooling for schools with infrastructure scores of 5; 20; 23; 25; 27; and 30.



Teacher quality

Inferior quality or inappropriate teaching was another issue raised. Children become bored if they cannot understand lessons. In one remote school, teachers got students to do manual work on the school grounds rather than give them lessons. In addition, in some remote and rural schools, parents disliked teachers not from their religious denomination (one community), and other parents were unhappy with how teachers treated and cared for their children. Parents reported that children accused one teacher of sending them out to play so s/he could sleep off the previous night's kava. Other parents were unhappy with temporary teachers teaching in Bislama rather than English. However, not all references to teachers were negative. Both boys and girls mentioned 'good' and 'kind' teachers among their favourite aspects of school. As mentioned earlier, parents also noted the positive influence of teachers when discussing the reasons to send children to school.

Discipline in school

Seen as a sub-set of 'teacher quality' issues, discipline – specifically physical discipline – is a widespread concern. Discipline-related matters were raised across four schools in both Shefa and Tafea (remote, rural and urban). The issue was raised by male and female parents and caregivers, male and female teachers and a community leader. Teachers strike and smack children, which affects enrolment and retention. In one case, a teacher was also a member of a child's family and reportedly felt entitled to hit the student. Year 1 students were 'whacked' by another teacher for damaging their schoolbooks or failing to do homework. One parent reported that her daughter was afraid of her teacher, who 'hit a little boy with a stick. The stick broke into pieces. She kept hitting him until a small piece was left in her hand'. This issue is further explored in the discussion on retention below.

3.1.2.2 Out-of-school issues

Lack of parental support

The inability or unwillingness of parents to support their children's education is the second most prevalent reason for children not enrolling in school. Sixteen informant groups raised this issue across all schools in the study. When parents are divorced or in the process of separating or are away working in Shefa and Tafea, children are often left with extended family or grandparents who are unable to look after them and oversee their schooling. This occurred in rural, urban and remote schools across both study provinces. Parents enrolling children late is also a problem in some schools, both rural and urban.

Parents who place little value on education often prioritise farming or working on gardens, even where government grants cover school fees. Many travel as part of the RSE programs. Often, they are under-educated and do not see the value of education. As one interviewee noted, 'If the kids can read or write, that's it. Enough.' Many prioritise custom over schooling (see the separate section below). Also, according to one urban school principal, some parents prefer farming or employment to staying at home and supporting their children's education. Under-educated parents have difficulty helping their children with schoolwork. English-speaking parents whose children attend Francophone schools also found it challenging to help their children with their studies.

Some urban families, particularly those with large numbers of children, will send only the eldest child to school, keeping the others home to help.

In some remote and rural schools, community leaders and principals identified kava and marijuana as a problem in some families, with parents smoking and drinking and, sometimes, also children.

One group of male parents/caregivers noted that when mothers move away from home, girls will often accompany their mothers, while boys will stay with their grandparents or extended family. A community leader in an urban school noted that some parents keep girls at home to help with housework and care for younger siblings.

Travel and distance to school

Children in remote schools, have long, difficult journeys to school. The data collection team encountered one boy carrying a knife which he uses to cut long grass on the way to school. He also crosses two creeks on his journey. Children living far from school (e.g. 3 km) are likelier to be absent. When it rains, children stay away from school. If parents are tired and the distance to school is long, they will not walk the child to school (urban school). According to a male teacher from an urban school, bus travel is too expensive for some parents whose children travel long distances to school (urban school, male teachers). Distance can also lead to late enrolment. One group noted that speeding cars means the walk to school is unsafe for children. Rainy weather and long grass are a significant challenge for children in one remote school. This issue was raised multiple times.

3.1.3 Gendered barriers to enrolment

The most common response to whether barriers to enrolment are different for boys and girls was that there were no differences. However, this was often contradicted almost immediately as participants detailed the impacts of different issues on girls and boys.

3.1.3.1 In-school issues

School performance

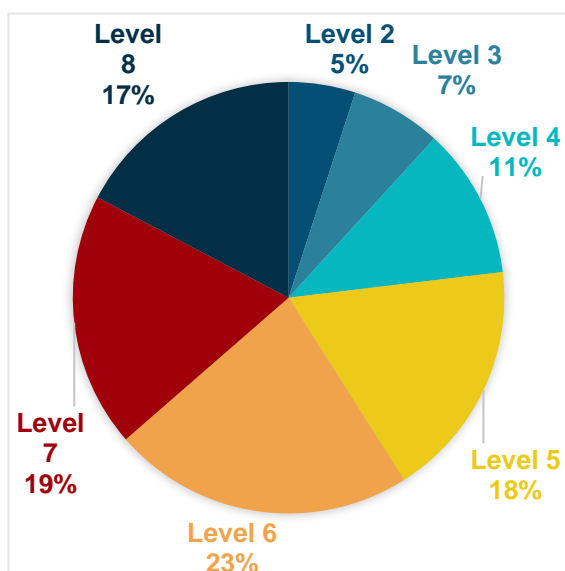
Children obtaining poor results reinforces negative attitudes toward schooling for parents and children. Study participants noted that children in year 3 could still not read, and low literacy levels were present in two school communities in Tafea. Children who enrol late in school or repeat and are older or bigger than their year group tend to drop out or transfer to other schools. Overall, girls are seen to do well in school and, in general, ‘bright’ students stay in school.

School performance could also be linked to a large gap between kindergarten and primary school Year 1. Some respondents suggested that the transition to primary school is a steep learning curve due to the difficulty for students learning in a language not spoken at home and which they may not have been exposed to previously.

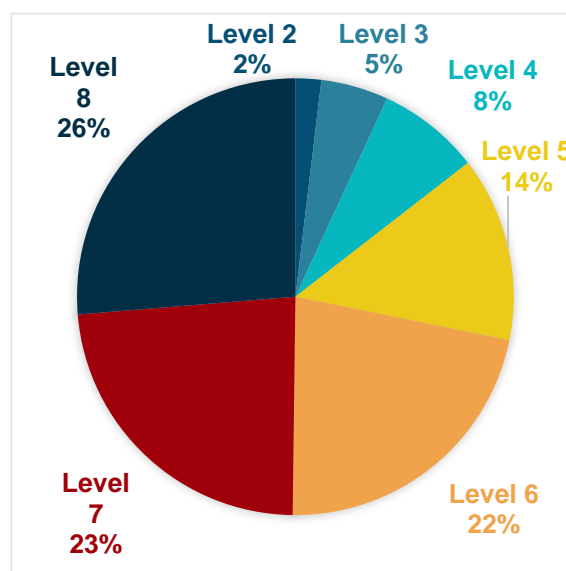
There are notable differences in results achieved by girls and boys, according to the VANSTA, which assesses the quality of education through literacy and numeracy tests for students in years 4, 6 and 9. 2019 VANSTA results showed that girls are achieving higher academic results than boys, with 71% of girls achieving a score of 6 or better, compared to 59% of boys. A VANSTA score of 6 exceeds the minimum standard of 4. See Figure 7, below. This was consistent with the data from the 2017 results, which tested Years 4 and 6. There is also a clear, positive relationship between student VANSTA achievements and their school’s infrastructure level. The infrastructure effect is similar for girls and boys.

Figure 7: Comparing the performance of girls and boys in school

Percentage of boys achieving each level of VANSTA score, 2019



Percentage of girls achieving each level of VANSTA score, 2019



3.1.3.2 Out-of-school issues

Community attitudes and custom

Community attitudes and custom affect enrolment and have strongly gendered dimensions, as emerged in discussions of enrolment and retention in primary school. Issues surrounding community attitudes and custom were raised across all school communities by 14 participant groups and individuals. The distinction between enrolment and retention became blurred when discussing their impact on schooling. Overall, they are seen as a barrier to primary education, especially for boys.

In Tafea, more than half the population are said to be ‘custom men’ who prioritise custom over the church and education. The link between commitment to custom, parents’ attitudes, and a lack of support for education is also identified in Shefa. The issue was identified by nine stakeholders across rural, remote and urban contexts (all but one school).



‘Elder sons are to continue the education and the young ones are held for the customs – prepare the kava – and practices and continue to live and value its belief.’

Community Leader, Tafea Province

Another community leader noted that this is beginning to change as parents realise the importance of education.

In both Shefa and Tafea, some parents prioritise boys and their education over girls, which aligns with the national figures on girls’ enrolment being lower than boys’. Because boys take a land title and remain in the community, while girls leave due to arranged marriages, some parents see boys as more valuable for the family’s future financial security. Parents are also stricter on girls than boys, with one respondent noting this was due to concerns that girls may become pregnant. Another noted it was because society was patrilineal. Girls also have a high workload at home, which can hold them back from school. Conversely, it can also lead them to take refuge in school, away from domestic tasks. The high workload at home may also make them tired in school, even in years 3 and 4. As noted in more detail below, boys also have domestic duties such as agricultural work and fishing, which keeps them away from school.

Different religious denominations were also seen as a barrier for some. In one school, tension existed between the local school council and principal due to religious issues, with religious leaders having a prominent role on the school grounds. One significant community figure identified differences in religious denomination as a barrier preventing children from attending school.

Child attitudes and behaviour

Evidence from 12 participant groups, including male and female teachers, principals, parents and community leaders, shows that boys’ and girls’ attitudes and behaviour significantly affect their schooling. This is strongly influenced by gender and norms around children’s behaviour.

Community expectations about children’s behaviour are deeply entrenched and show links to in-school factors that affect schooling, such as which students receive corporal punishment, participate in fighting and bullying or commit to learning. While more boys enrol in school, they are considered less likely to stay due to behavioural issues.



‘Yes, more boys enrol in school than girls, but they are very complaining, selective and demanding. If parents don’t support them as they expect, they would refuse to go to school.’

Community Leader, Shefa Province

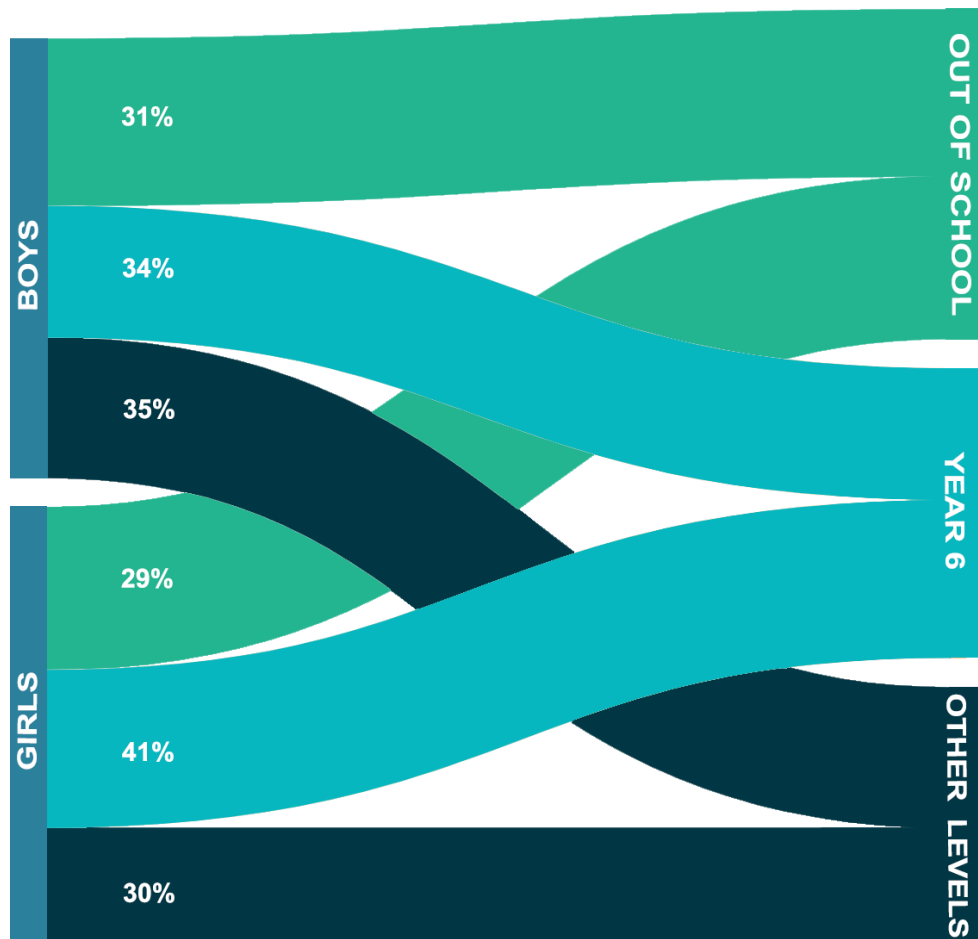
The issue raised by the Community Leader in Shefa province is further examined in the discussion below regarding retention.

3.2 Retention

What factors inside and outside school contribute to differences between boys' and girls' retention in kindergarten and subsequent years of primary school?

The gender analysis of MoET data identified that girls have a slightly more predictable journey through school than boys – specifically, girls have a stronger retention rate than boys. While the difference is slight, it is persistent, as shown in Figure 8, and contrasts with the figures showing that more boys start school than girls. Overall, high numbers of girls and boys remain out of school in Vanuatu. For example, 31% of boys and 29% of girls attending school in Year 1 in 2016 were no longer attending by 2021, when they would be expected to be in Year 6. For the 2016 Year 1 cohort, 34% of boys were in Year 6 in 2021, compared to 41% of girls. 35% of boys were in other levels, primarily due to repeating classes, while this was the case for 30% of girls. This trend was the same for the children who were in Year 1 in 2015.

Figure 8: The location of the cohort of 2016 Year 1 students in 2021



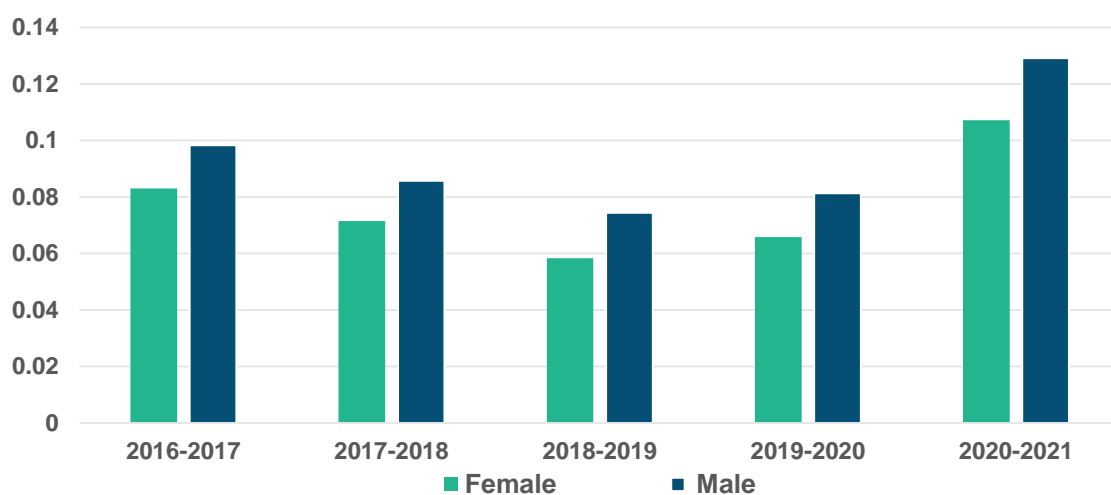
Prepared by MoET data analysis services

Gender differences between girls and boys and issues that affect girls and boys differently become more visible influences on children’s progress through primary school than their influence on enrolment. While the themes were broadly similar in discussions of enrolment and retention with adult women and men, gender was considered more significant in determining children’s experience of primary school. Children’s voices are also reflected in the data on retention.

For this data collection, retention is understood as children’s progress through school, including whether they progress to the next year, repeat a year, drop out or transfer to a different school. The VESP II gender analysis of education data found that across all provinces, retention falls for each year of primary school for both boys and girls, but that slightly more boys drop out of school and repeat than girls do. Figure 9 below illustrates these figures.

The study also specifically explored the reasons children drop out of school after Year 1. This trend emerged strongly in the analysis of the Open VEMIS data, and the findings offer some insights into why it happens.

Figure 9: Repetition rate by gender, Years 1-6



Source: Open VEMIS Sept 2020; Figure developed for VESP II Analysis of Education Data: A Gender Perspective, December 2020.

3.2.1 Why continue with schooling?

Informants highlighted many in-school factors as reasons for boys and girls to continue schooling. Overall, respondents highlighted that school provided children a safe and positive environment. The support that teachers provide to children, including creating a positive learning environment, was the most common reason why respondents believed students continued schooling.

According to parents, principals and teachers, other reasons include forming friendships, engaging in religious education and accessing church facilities at school. They also include participating in activities such as sports, music and drawing, which are regarded as positive for children’s health and development and accessing learning resources unavailable at home.

Proximity to the school was the dominant external factor enabling children to stay in school. If schools were accessible by foot, then children would continue in school. Location was also a common factor in why children dropped out of school, suggesting that school location is a strong determinant of retention. Children in more rural and remote areas may have fewer opportunities to access education than children in more urban areas.

3.2.2 Gendered barriers to retention in primary school

As noted above, gender emerges as a significant issue influencing boys’ and girls’ progress through school. Figure 10 shows the prevalence of gendered issues that arose during discussions on retention in school. While the themes are broadly similar to those related to enrolment, the order has changed, and gendered differences emerge far more strongly.

Figure 10: Challenges undermining retention that affect girls and boys differently

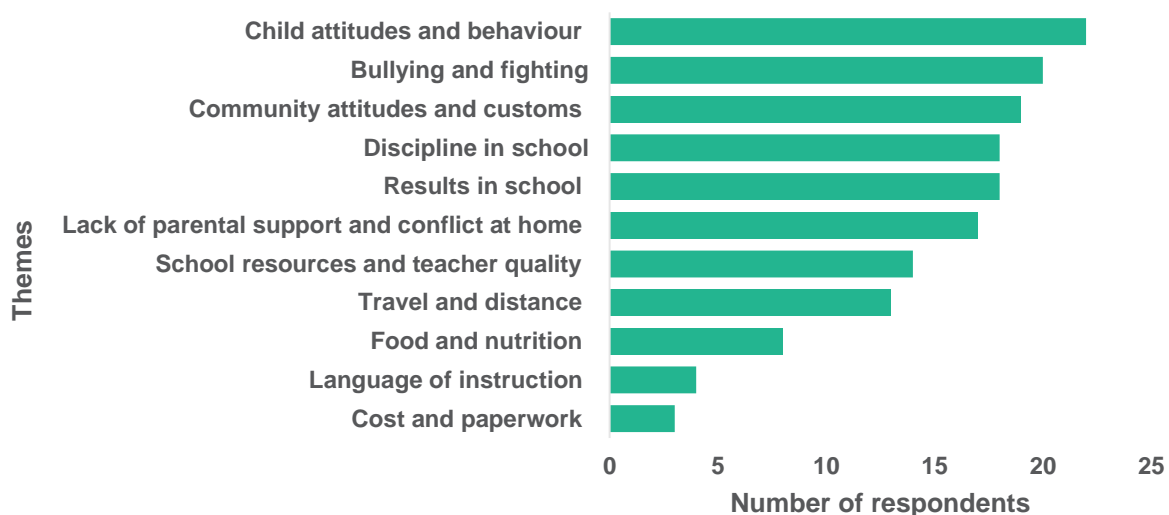


Table 5 presents a gendered breakdown of two dominant issues raised as barriers to children’s retention in primary school and which affect girls and boys differently. They reflect community gender norms and expectations around gender roles and affect boys’ and girls’ experience of primary school. The table provides a snapshot of how the same issues affect children differently due to gender. They directly reflect community voices, combining objective observations (such as boys are involved in circumcision ceremonies) with subjective reflections that include gender bias and stereotyping (such as boys are less resilient than girls). The observations do not have a single positive reflection on boys’ behaviour. This may be due to the framing of the question, which asked respondents to consider why boys do not perform as well as girls in school. However, it also reflects community perceptions of the differences between girls and boys.

Table 5: Participant attitudes about the behaviour of girls and boys

Child attitudes and behaviour⁸

Girls	Boys
Girls are studious and well-behaved	Boys are badly disciplined because parents do not control boys
Parents are stricter on girls than boys	Boys are more vulnerable than girls to peer pressure from groups and older boys
Girls listen to their parents and, in class, are more respectful and work harder	Boys do not listen to teachers and skip school if they get into trouble
Girls are more resilient and better able to cope with problems, while boys complain more	Boys are less resilient than girls
Parents pay more attention to girls	Boys react worse than girls in the face of hardship, such as when parents leave for seasonal work (RSE)
If girls stay home, they must do housework, so they prefer to come to school	Boys are too lazy to learn and therefore perform badly in school

Community attitudes and custom

Girls	Boys
Girls are held back at home to help with housework and look after children	Boys are expected to assist with agricultural work, such as pig-feeding, and have little time for school
Parents pay more attention to girls and discipline them more than they discipline boys. Thus, they are better behaved and do better in school	Circumcision ceremonies lead to boys missing significant amounts of schooling
Early marriage leads to girls dropping out of school	Boys help fathers prepare kava and miss school
Expectations that girls will leave the family as an adult undermines support for girls' education	Boys are expected to provide for families through hunting and fishing
Girls are expected to be compliant and help their families and are therefore expected to do well in school	Boys are considered responsible for holding on to cultural traditions, and some families fear they may forget them if they go to school
Attitudes to and customs around puberty lead girls to miss school	Boys are expected to inherit land and remain in the community, so families see the value in their education
Mothers participate in school activities, presenting a positive role model for girls	Fathers do not participate in school activities and, as a result, boys learn not to value education
	Boys are expected to grow up and find employment in unskilled jobs such as RSE, so there is no incentive for them to stay in school

⁸ 'Child attitudes and behaviour' is child-specific and reflects children's agency, while 'Community attitudes and customs' relates to the broader, predominantly adult, community.

3.2.2.1 Out-of-school issues

Child attitudes and behaviour

Gendered differences in children's behaviour and attitudes were seen as the single largest factor affecting children's progress through primary school, as identified among 22 groups and individuals across all schools and among all participants, except the boy students' groups.

'Some kids have too much fun at home,' according to female parents/caregivers in Tafea. This general statement was broken down into gendered observations. Boys 'just play' and don't take school seriously, with more appealing activities at home, such as hunting and fishing. Boys watch movies or play games late at night and are then unable to focus in school. In contrast, male parents in Tafea agreed with the expressed sentiment that: 'Girls are quiet at home. They look at their schoolbooks more than boys.'

One girl student from a remote school stated that boys always ask girls for help. She further noted that 'The boys even play around during exam revisions.'

Parents give too much freedom to boys. Respondents in Tafea suggested that parents are afraid of their children, especially their sons and do not discipline them. The sentiment of female parents/caregivers in Shefa was summed up in the statement: Boys show a lack of respect for parents due to peer pressure and the influence of friends and older children. Boys always disobey at home, and they do the same thing at school.

Teachers noted that boys think they have a 'higher mentality' (are superior) than female teachers and therefore will not listen to or respect them; boys are considered stubborn and unwilling to ask for help with their schoolwork.



'If the teachers discipline the boys, they don't come to school.'

Parent/Caregiver, Tafea Province

Across both provinces, urban and remote schools identified that boys are widely seen to be more vulnerable to peer pressure, including taking drugs and drinking alcohol. Only one respondent noted that both girls and boys can misbehave. When boys miss school, they fail exams and have to repeat classes.

While three stakeholders noted that both boys and girls are susceptible to peer pressure and can demonstrate the challenges they are having with behaviour and attitudes, boys are 'strong headed', and their 'behaviour is stronger than girls'. Boys are considered more susceptible to peer pressure, which may include pressure to drink kava and smoke marijuana, although one respondent also noted that girls can do the same.

Other observations:

- Boys don't listen, but girls do
- Boys, especially, and some girls, do not look after stationery, school bags, uniforms
- Girls listen to their parents and, in class, are more respectful and work harder
- Girls are more resilient and better able to cope with problems, while boys complain more
- Boys react worse to hardship, such as when parents leave for seasonal work (e.g. RSE)
- If teachers 'talk strongly' to boys, they will leave school and not return

The RSE program was raised numerous times across Shefa communities and one Tafea community as a disincentive to boys attending school. It was seen as a source of easy money that is available regardless of whether workers are educated. Both parents and peers can influence boys by questioning the value of education when RSE work is an option. Alternative views, such as the financial benefits of RSE enabling children to remain in school, were not raised in these discussions. Some respondents across urban and rural areas believed that boys do not take education seriously because they know they will inherit land. Land ownership in Vanuatu goes to the oldest male by law,

meaning that the future financial security for girls is largely dependent on meeting a husband who owns land. This could influence girls to try harder in school, given they are starting from an unequal playing field.

Discipline

When discipline is considered in terms of child behaviour and, particularly, the behaviour of disobedient boys, it becomes a strongly gendered issue. Four adult groups responded that boys are more likely to drop out of school and that teachers hit boys more than girls because of their bad behaviour. Discipline was the second most significant issue raised by children and affects boys significantly more than girls. Boys raised discipline as a reason they disliked school 30 times compared to 12 times by girls.

Children reported that teachers hit children for playing with friends, talking in class, not doing their homework, being late or absent, giving the wrong answer to a question or speaking Bislama. Female and male teachers and principals hit children, sometimes called 'whipping', with coconut brooms, rulers or wood. Children find this humiliating. One boy said that when he was found misbehaving, his teacher would flog him. He said he did not like the teacher doing this in front of his classmates.

Other forms of punishment reported by children included being sent home for not wearing the correct uniform, being shouted at for poor test results, being made to sweep the class for speaking Bislama and finding the door closed if they arrive late. Humiliating punishments include being made to kneel in front of the class, having to cut elephant grass or, when found walking around in class, being forced to use their bare hands to pull out grass that stings or cuts.

Adult respondents observed that parents felt that school staff administering corporal punishment made schools unsafe for their children and that aggressive punishment by teachers led children to drop out or transfer away from schools.

Community attitudes and customs

Nineteen stakeholders, predominantly adults, across all schools raised 'culture' as a gendered issue that leads to children, particularly boys, repeating or dropping out of school.

Community expectations that boys will earn income through RSE, land ownership, or hunting lead to boys being valued over girls, summed up by one informant as 'boys are king'. Parents value boys as 'young providers' who contribute to the family by fishing on a canoe or hunting flying foxes. School is not valued by parents or boys (rural and remote schools, both provinces), leading boys to miss school. This attitude also contributes to boys' poor behaviour compared to girls (urban schools). This is despite stakeholders acknowledging that women also work on RSE. In one area, more women participate in seasonal work than men do.

Gender roles also mean that only mothers are seen coming to help with school activities. Fathers are not seen to value school, preferring their sons to participate in custom-related behaviour such as drinking and smoking, which may involve other young boys.



'It's the culture. The fathers send the sons to do things. The boys prepare the kava drink for their fathers. They can do this every day after school. Then they get interested in doing this (more) than coming to school.'

Male Parent/Caregiver, Tafea Province

Boys are felt to be particularly impacted by duties and expectations related to custom. Circumcision is a major cultural event seen to have a significant impact on boys' participation in school. Boys participate in lengthy circumcision ceremonies that take several months, from June to August each year. Young boys are also held back by fathers to support them in customary activities, including preparing kava (urban and remote schools in both provinces). One church leader noted that circumcision is a 2–3-week event celebrated annually, particularly in West Tanna (from Whitegrass to Bethel), which leads to children dropping out of school.

Both girls and boys take part in other ceremonies, which result in them missing school. Activities such as marriages and funerals take up to a week and are often on different islands.

Girls are also impacted by custom in different ways. The custom of arranged marriage, which is widespread in Tafea, curtails girls' education. Girls' participation in school is also affected by a 'misunderstanding of puberty', referring to concerns around the onset of menstruation, which leads girls to miss school (female teachers).

Attitudes are also changing as parents see the impact of education on daughters. In some cases, this is linked to the view that educated girls help parents more than boys, such as taking illiterate parents to the hospital.



'Today parents view girls' education as important, too.'

Male Parent/Caregiver, Tafea Province

3.2.2.2 In-school issues

Bullying, fighting and disruptive behaviour

A major issue from a child's perspective is widespread bullying and fighting in school. It was the single most discouraging issue raised by both boys and girls at all schools, with more girls mentioning it than boys. Boys are almost always seen as the perpetrators, with rare exceptions when girls are noted to be fighting or teasing other children.

Behaviours include ganging up and fighting, slapping, asking for money, stealing other children's stationery and slippers, and hiding schoolbags. Children fight singly or in groups of four or five, often when the teacher is not looking. Children complained of gossiping and name-calling (such as 'big head'), and one girl complained of being teased by boys for having dirty clothes.

Girls and boys reported being afraid to tell the teacher about being bullied or hit, although one girl said she fought back and stopped a boy who was repeatedly physically attacking her. Teachers can respond to reports of fighting with physical discipline (more violence). One girl noted that three boys in her year hit her on the back when the teacher was out of the room. The teacher responded by hitting the boys with a wooden spoon, but it did not stop them, which suggests corporal punishment is ineffective in preventing bullying and violence.

Bullying and fighting makes boys and girls feel unsafe in school. One boy noted that fighting and bullying at school are big problems, saying he does not want to take part in them. Another boy at a different school said fighting 'makes boys feel unsafe'.

In contrast to the almost universal references to bullying among children, virtually no adults raised the issue. Only two parents (1 male and 1 female) mentioned bullying and fighting. One noted that boys are 'fiercely strong, physically strong, and can give injury to another student in school. When they do these acts, they leave school.'

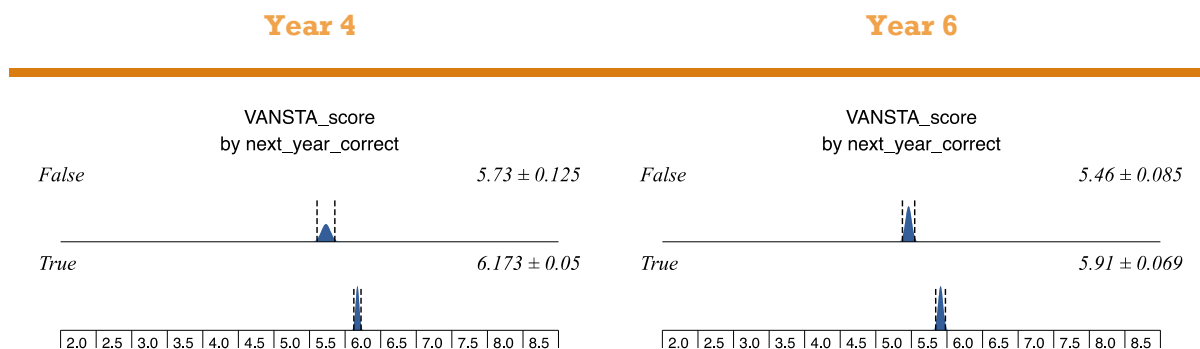
Results in school

Eighteen groups and individuals raised children's performance in school as a factor affecting children's ongoing participation in school, particularly boys. This issue was raised by male and female parents and caregivers, community leaders, a school principal, male and female teachers, and girl students at one school. Respondents linked poor school results to negative attitudes and low attendance among children, particularly boys. Both boys and girls are discouraged from school if their results are poor.

These findings are also captured in the analysis of MoET data, which shows a clear correlation between VANSTA results and children returning to school the following year. Figure 11 shows that children who achieved approximately 5.73 in VANSTA in 2017 did not return to Year 5 the following year, while those who achieved a higher VANSTA result of 6.173 returned to school for Year 5. The

pattern is the same for children in Year 6, showing that those with lower VANSTA results were less likely to continue their schooling the next year.

Figure 11: Relationship between VANSTA scores and progression through school



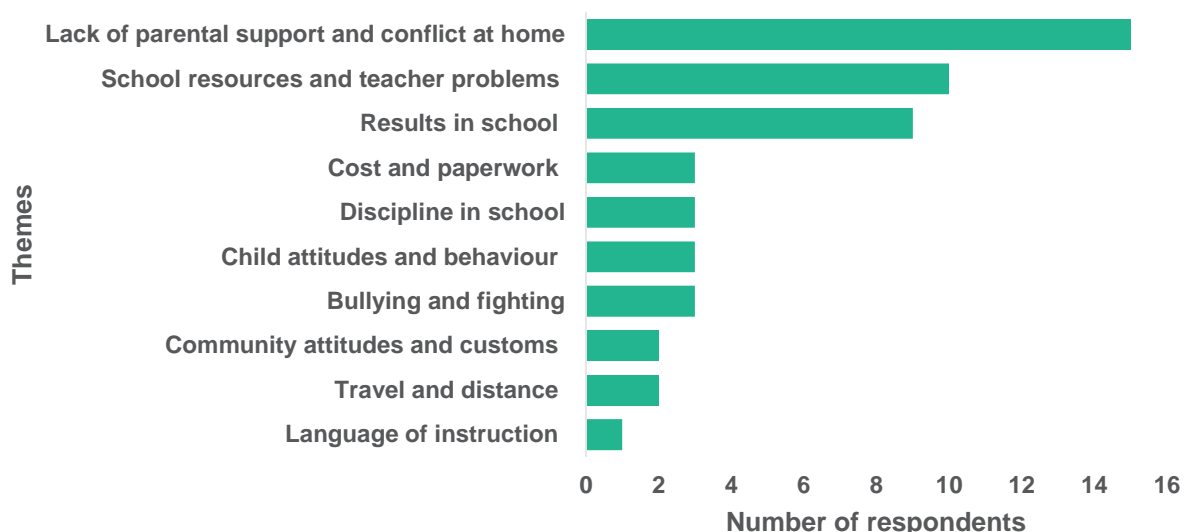
A widely held view is that boys have a lazy attitude towards learning that leads them to repeat classes many times, causes them frustration and results in them dropping out of school (multiple stakeholders, urban schools in both provinces). When boys are older and larger than the other students in their classroom, they also drop out. This can happen because they start school late. One respondent noted that the average age in Years 5 – 7 is 13 – 15 years. According to respondents, children may be overage because of absenteeism, poor teaching, and repeating classes.

One community leader noted that parents expect girls to perform strongly in schools, leading parents to prioritise girls' education over boys', where resources are tight.

3.2.3 Barriers to retention that affect all children

Figure 12 below shows the issues most frequently raised in the study as factors undermining the retention of children in primary school. These themes affect all children, with no specific differences noted by respondents for boys and girls. However, as noted above, several of the same themes are also considered to have gendered implications, such as discipline issues in school and children's attitudes and behaviour.

Figure 12: Challenges for retention, regardless of gender



3.2.3.1 Out-of-school issues

Lack of support from parents and conflict at home

A lack of support for schooling at home was noted as a major factor that discourages children from continuing school. It affects both boys and girls and was raised across all groups of adult stakeholders. Male and female children also shared stories indicating that challenges at home made it difficult to attend school. Issues mentioned included parents being unable to help with schoolwork due to their lack of understanding and parents unable to ensure children participate in school.

Parents’ influence as role models is considered significant. One father noted that because he supported his children, they did well in school and now have good jobs in Vila. However, many parents are unwilling or unable to offer this moral support to encourage children’s education. According to one principal, children of young parents often miss school, which is a major problem. Divorce leads to children leaving school, sometimes because they transfer to other schools and sometimes because they leave school altogether. Informants suggested that single parents, particularly single mothers, face challenges keeping children at school. This view aligned with students’ perception of their experience and was also noted by other study participants. Children placed into the care of foster families or grandparents were also not well supported in attending school.

One issue repeatedly raised across Shefa was parents moving from the community for work, participating in the RSE in New Zealand, working in the capital, Port Vila, or working on other islands. Both women and men participate in RSE. Children often remain behind, staying with extended family or friends. However, without strong parental or carer guidance, they are at risk of dropping out of school. RSE can also lead to family breakdown, with relationships splitting up while one or both parents are away.

Family violence affects both boys and girls and was reported by boys, girls and adult participants in the study in both provinces. Boys and girls said they suffered being hit at home by mothers, fathers, brothers and grandfathers. Students reported that seeing parents arguing and fighting each other, particularly fathers hitting mothers, was disturbing and a cause for not attending school. Drug and alcohol use by both mothers and fathers also undermines children’s schooling. One respondent shared the example of a child who told her that his father and mother did not have money for breakfast because they had spent it all on kava.

3.2.3.2 In-school issues

School environment and resources

Problems with school facilities and resources, including a lack of trained teachers, were noted across all but one school, but this issue was raised less frequently than others.

Both boys and girls disliked not having enough toilets in school or having dirty, graffitied or broken toilets. Another child was afraid of stinging insects in the school compound, such as hornets and bees. Two children said their school uniform was a problem because they have only one set of school clothes. Thus, children may not want to come to school when the uniform is dirty or still damp from washing.

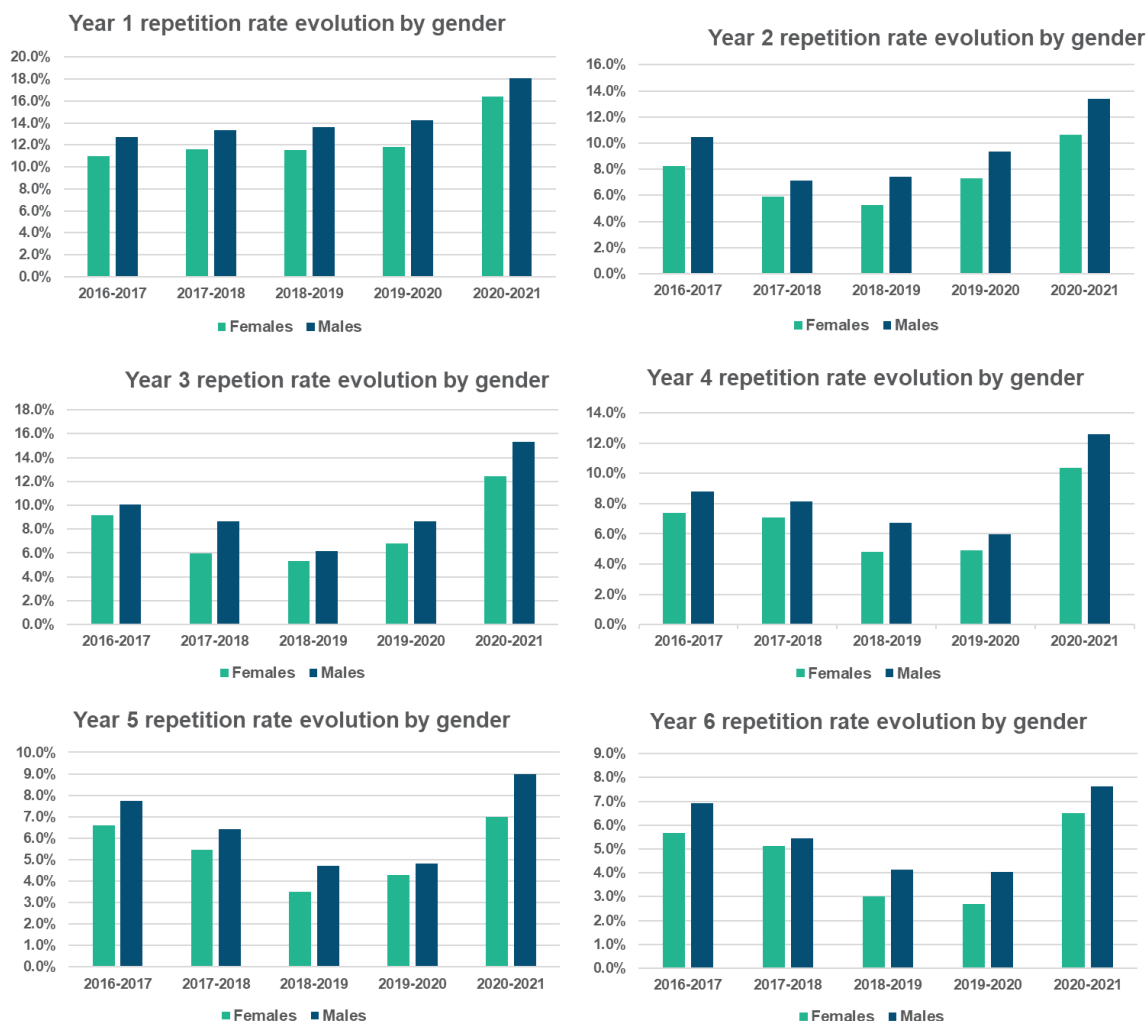
Overcrowding was a significant problem in one school. To free up space, children were promoted to the next class regardless of their performance. Children did not have room to play, and teachers did not have room to support children properly. Another school was engaged in a land dispute regarding the school grounds, resulting in conflict and uncertainty for children, some of whom transferred to other schools.

Poor quality teaching, untrained and casual teachers were also identified as problems. In rural and remote schools, it was difficult to secure trained teachers or to retain them. Casual teachers were paid poorly and were unmotivated. One school reported a teacher sleeping through class (resulting in the children stealing his keys). When teachers do not come to school, children run amok. Some children are afraid of being beaten if their teacher is not there.

3.2.4 Year 1 Retention – special case

The analysis of MoET education data conducted in 2020 showed a surprisingly high repetition rate after Year 1 (VESP II, 2020). Reasons for this were explored through the interviews and group discussions. Respondents suggested that more boys drop out of school after Year 1 than girls, as girls are more interested in going to school, and boys enjoy spending time with their fathers undertaking outdoor activities. It was also mentioned some children can be quite attached to their mother at this young age and not want to attend school. Circumcision was also identified as a reason for boys dropping out of school around Year 1, with these cultural ceremonies occurring between Years 1 and 2.

Figure 13: Repetition rates across Years 1-6



The repetition figures for Year 1 are notably higher. There is quite a noticeable learning jump from kindergarten to Year 1, which might result in children finding the learning transition too difficult, leaving them unable to engage in school and dropping out. Teachers (female) also highlighted foreign language as a potential reason for students disengaging and dropping out. The language of the curriculum is either English or French, which are not the mother tongue in Vanuatu. Respondents suggested that being taught in a foreign language is difficult and makes it hard for children to focus. This suggests that children may require more support from their teachers and the curriculum to enhance the ease of transition from kindergarten.

Having large families can also lead children to drop out earlier because families decide to keep younger children at home to support agricultural and market activities. Other factors, such as the displacement of parents due to employment or health reasons, can also lead to children dropping out early.

Additional factors for high dropout rates in Year 1 include the distance from school, lack of interest in school, teacher quality, strong discipline in school compared to home and parental views that education is not important.

3.2.5 Disability, Enrolment and Retention

Stakeholders identified a range of factors that impact a child with a disability enrolling and staying in school. The most common barriers to enrolment and retention identified by respondents included the absence of teachers skilled in inclusive education, inadequate school facilities, no tailored learning materials, the risk of being bullied, a lack of inclusive participation options in classroom activities and limited parental support for their children's attendance.

The most mentioned barrier for enrolment and retention identified by all stakeholders was the issue of teacher quality. Respondents highlight that teachers currently do not have the knowledge or skills to accommodate the needs of students with disability or manage the different behaviours that children with different disabilities present. Because teachers do not receive training on inclusive education, they are unable to support these students.

In addition, limited facilities and inclusive learning materials to support CWD in learning were key deterrents for parents enrolling their children. Parents and teachers also mentioned that a lack of inclusive classroom opportunities for these children was an issue. Bullying was another key factor highlighted as a deterrent for enrolment and retention, where both parents and children made decisions not to attend school due to bullying by other children.

School location and the mode of transport to school were also identified as barriers for children with physical disability. Walking was identified as the most common mode for students to travel to and from school, suggesting that it was not possible for students with a physical disability affecting mobility to attend at all.

Parents, teachers and community leaders also suggested stigma was sometimes a reason for parents not enrolling children with a disability in school. One stakeholder mentioned that sometimes children feel embarrassed or ashamed and choose not to attend school.

Parents identified inaccessible school infrastructure as one reason their CWD drop out of school, highlighting that the environment is not appropriate for different disabilities, such as those who need access to toilet facilities suitable for their needs.

Limited support from parents for their CWD to access and stay in school was also a key issue highlighted by parents, principals, teachers and community leaders. Parents did not see value in their CWD attending school because of insufficient support from teachers, facilities and learning materials. The impact of bullying and different behavioural issues from some children would often lead to CWD dropping out.

It is important to note that quite a few stakeholders highlighted that enrolment and retention for CWD often depended on the type of disability. Physical and intellectual disability each present different types of challenges for students and schools. There is a need to conduct further research into the potential for tailoring support for the individual child.

4 Community recommendations and requests

What can schools and MoET do to address these challenges in the short and long term?

4.1 Community recommendations for improving participation in school

Community members, principals and teachers requested various responses from the government and schools to address the challenges raised during the study. Some initiatives may already be underway at the government level, but schools and their communities are unaware of them. Few gender-specific recommendations were identified. However, one recommendation was to provide education about sexual and reproductive health for both boys and girls. Life skills programs and prayer programs were also suggested. The 'Just Play' program is active in several schools and is seen as positively promoting girls' and boys' participation in sports and other activities.

To improve school participation for all students, suggestions were presented that fall loosely into three categories: (i) working with parents and communities, (ii) working with teachers and principals, and (iii) working to improve infrastructure and school policy.

4.1.1 Working with parents and communities

1. Actively engage with communities and families to promote awareness of relevant issues, including through the 'nakamal'.⁹ Campaigns and training activities suggested include the following:
 - Promoting the value of education, including for employment in the future, and changing negative perceptions of education through positive examples
 - Implementing right-age campaigns
 - Offering training to parents on ways to support children in school
 - Explaining the curriculum
 - Providing support and training for young parents, including on family living and managing money
 - Making policy changes regarding government payment of school fees
 - Introducing family planning
 - Offering parents/carers classes in the language of instruction so they can support children.
2. Schools should build strong relationships with communities through effective and ongoing communication. This engagement should include sharing school financial reports, ensuring families and carers understand what is taught in the curriculum and informing the community about school leadership and management.

⁹ A nakamal is a traditional meeting place in Vanuatu. It is used for gatherings, ceremonies and the drinking of kava. A nakamal is found in every significant Vanuatu community, but the design of the nakamal and the traditions surrounding it vary between areas.

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3. Recognise and respond to the significance of culture in the community and how it intersects with education. Initiatives suggested include the following:
 - Engaging with communities to conduct outreach with families, promote awareness of how custom affects repetition rates and find solutions to challenges
 - Developing a take-home learning pack for boys involved in circumcision ceremonies
 - Encouraging communities to hold circumcision ceremonies during school holiday periods
4. Schools should introduce **social activities** in and through schools to engage children and the community. Possibilities include sports events, social nights, religious celebrations, music and talent quests. Schools sometimes have the only playground or sports field and could leverage such assets to build community relations. Schools should involve older children (10-13) in running extra-curricular or social activities.

4.1.2 Working with teachers and principals

To improve teacher availability and quality, the following should be implemented:

- Conduct weekly principal visits to each class to supervise and support teaching
- Provide enough teachers for classes and avoid multi-year classes
- Conduct teacher training outside teaching days to avoid disrupting schooling
- Build teacher accommodation at remote/rural schools
- Limit the time teachers can spend in one community
- Ensure a mix of teachers from the local area and other islands
- Encourage activities to make teaching interesting, such as competitions for students with prizes (e.g. spelling bees, French language quizzes)
- Ensure counsellors are available in school

4.1.3 School infrastructure and policy

MoET should build strong relationships with other ministries and government agencies to ensure smooth school development. These include departments responsible for roads to ensure all schools have good road access and authorities responsible for land to ensure crowded schools can acquire grounds to develop and expand.

The government should improve the school environment by providing additional classrooms, sports facilities, health clinics, playgrounds for small children and computer and science labs. Good water sources and enough toilets were also requested. School canteens on-site would prevent children from leaving school grounds (urban areas). School fencing was also requested, including security guards to patrol the boundaries.

Restrictions on how the school grant is used should be eased. Allow the grant to cover social and cultural activities that interest students. Grants are currently restricted to 40% for school projects and 60% for academic projects and should be freed up to enable schools to implement more development projects.

Government and schools should develop or improve policies and management in several areas and provide the necessary resources for implementation. These include the following:

- Bullying prevention
- Child protection, including teacher aggression towards children
- Compulsory schooling
- Truancy reporting
- School transfer, including authorisation from MoET or the Principal Education Officer to limit unnecessary school transfers
- Fair distribution of trained teachers across Vanuatu
- Principals developing school policies to improve transparency and management of assets, classroom management, and procedures for recruiting School Council members and teachers.
- Provincial education officers visiting all schools before the academic year to ensure strong administration and organisation. Community leaders (chiefs) visiting every house to encourage all children to attend school.

New ideas are needed to respond to several issues. Examples include the following:

- Language: children speaking in vernacular is a problem in some communities
- Vocational training: job-oriented training should be considered for inclusion in schools
- Custom, culture and religion: schools can play a bigger role in educating children in these areas

To overcome the challenges of distance, schools should do the following:

- Build boarding houses or establish a system of host families for children who must travel long distances to school
- Provide breakfast and lunch at school for children who live far from school
- Build more schools in rural areas
- Provide school buses or other transport to bring children to school
- Improve road safety around schools.

4.2 Community recommendations related to children with a disability

Specific requests and recommendations to improve schooling for CWD reflected recognition across the community that CWD should be able to participate in school. The protection of CWD was a strong theme. Community members in some areas were aware of the government policy promoting inclusive education, but they pointed to a lack of monitoring to ensure implementation. Suggestions provided include the following:

4.2.1 Knowledge, skills and resources for education providers

Teachers and schools need assistance providing effective support for children with special needs. The areas of learning and resource issues to address include the following:

- Training in identifying disabilities and supporting special needs
- Training to create inclusive classrooms and develop inclusive-aware teachers
- Ensuring appropriate resources for dedicated schools in each province as a minimum.
- Finding ways to involve and include CWD, e.g. as referees in volleyball
- Training teachers in sign language
- Providing resources and learning materials in the appropriate formats to support children's needs
- Implementing a special program for CWD prepared by the GoV

4.2.2 Facilities

Vanuatu's school system should be suitably equipped to ensure it is more inclusive for children with disability. Achieving this will require considering the following:

- Developing a dedicated school for CWD to keep children safe, including from bullying
- Ensuring separate toilets and appropriate bathrooms for CWD
- Providing separate rooms in schools to support CWD learning activities
- Installing ramps to improve access to schools and classrooms
- Providing transport for CWD
- Supplying assistive devices to help CWD at school.

4.2.3 Awareness-raising with parents and communities

- Promoting further action and raising greater awareness regarding the government's campaign to promote the inclusion of CWD in schools around Port Vila.
- Conducting consultations between school and parents to reassure parents the school can accommodate CWD
- Carrying out awareness raising for parents on the importance of enrolling CWD, including using positive role models showing what is possible for people with disability, including women with disability
- Working with disability organisations to inspire and encourage CWD and their families regarding available possibilities
- Supporting the community to support CWD to develop their independence
- Supporting and training parents in caring for CWD in the home, including how to help children with their education
- The respondents acknowledged that the above recommendations require resources and specifically requested that resources be dedicated to ensuring effective support for CWD in schools becomes a reality.

5 Interpreting the findings with a gender lens: areas for action

The findings presented above are familiar in the Vanuatu context. However, documenting them makes it clear that several issues demand an urgent policy or management response. The starkest issue is violence against children, particularly in school. While some children are experiencing violence outside school, violence perpetrated by teachers and principals against children is widely reported. Such actions contravene international conventions, DFAT's commitments and MoET and the broader GoV pledges to keep children safe.

5.1 Physical violence in schools

This study noted numerous examples of physical punishment and violence against children by teachers, principals and family members and between children. Bullying – physical and non-physical – is a form of violence among children and is the most widespread challenge noted by both boys and girls in the study. Schools need support to focus on and address this distressing issue, which significantly impacts children's schooling.

Violence against children can have lifelong physical and mental consequences. It is linked to impaired cognitive development, increased drug and alcohol abuse, greater risk-taking behaviour, and a higher incidence of health disease and suicide later in life. Children exposed to violence are more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed, and become perpetrators or victims of further violence when compared with those who have not experienced violence (World Health Organization – WHO, 2020). From a women's rights and human rights perspective, physical violence in schools also perpetuates a culture in which violence is an accepted way of asserting power. Since it is so often linked to the poor behaviour most frequently associated with boys, the relationship between violence and the experience of being male is also perpetuated. This is part of a vicious cycle that undermines non-aggressive forms of conflict resolution, presents poor role modelling for children and contributes to ongoing gender inequality.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) INSPIRE framework (WHO 2016) identifies seven strategies for ending violence against children. It recognises children's critical need for education and life skills and the need to support families and work towards changing harmful gender norms. It also notes the importance of implementing and enforcing laws, which extends to regulations such as child safeguarding policies. Resources and strategies should be reviewed and implemented to address the problem of violence in Vanuatu's primary schools.

5.2 Gains in girls' education are fragile

The view that education is not as important for girls as for boys persists across the study communities. Evidence shows that many families consider education valuable for both girls and boys. However, there remain widely held views that girls must stay at home to care for children or that parents with many children and limited resources will choose to educate a son first. There is an indication that girls' commitment drives girls' higher retention in school and that their good performance in school helps them stay there. There are signs that some families increasingly see the value of education, if only because they expect their girls to take care of them, such as helping them read instructions or taking them to clinics. In the face of this fragile support for girls' education and the tradition of girls' poor enrolment in school, it is critical that efforts to support boys do not undermine the gains made for girls.

Educating girls and providing gender-equitable schools benefits whole societies and is a basic human right. UNICEF notes that education for girls reduces maternal and child mortality rates, increases the

marriage age, and leads to greater prosperity as national growth rates rise. Gender equitable schools also lead to better outcomes for boys by addressing the gender norms linked to boys' disengagement from school (UNICEF, 2021).

5.3 Custom and education

A third issue that calls for a focused response concerns the intersection of custom and formal education. This issue is as old as schools in Vanuatu but does not feature in the current policy landscape. This issue is complex and potentially divisive, as shown in the schools where community members spoke with frustration about the 'custom man' and his fear that education would undermine children's cultural identity.

Given the real impact of customs such as circumcision ceremonies on the time children spend in school, MoET is encouraged to explore ways schools can respond to and work around important customary rites. This could include timing of school holidays, adjusting the curriculum and providing resources to support a school culture that works with, rather than against, local custom as far as possible. Policy insights from other contexts where schools seek to shape education to respond to cultural diversity should be studied, together with efforts to engage with local communities to find ways schools can support custom and provide formal education to children. It is also important to note that while boys' roles in custom emerged as a key reason for poor attendance, the impact of custom on girls was only briefly acknowledged. However, the custom of arranged marriage and the onset of puberty are important. Perhaps they are less relevant for primary school aged children. However, there is also the possibility that research participants were not as alert to the impact of culture on girls.

5.4 Behaviour, performance and stereotyping

Careful analysis is also needed to understand the data around the behaviour of boys and girls that emerged through the study: the view that boys do badly in school and girls do well. As a research based primarily on the views of different members of school communities, this study recognizes that informants in the research are influenced heavily by their own lived experience, shaped by the same community norms and values that affect boys' and girls' experience of primary education. On the one hand, the views expressed for the research reflect gender stereotyping, which assigns characteristics to boy and girl children based on gender bias. Gender stereotyping is a key challenge for addressing gender inequality worldwide, as it feeds into and exacerbates existing gender bias in society. On the other hand, differences between boys' and girls' attitudes, behaviour and results in school are noted worldwide (Evans, Akmal & Jakiela, 2019). They are recognised as a significant factor undermining educational outcomes. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the issue and work with communities to find effective solutions to the challenges driving boys' poor engagement. There is an emerging body of knowledge in this field globally, highlighting physical differences in girls' and boys' development, cultural and social factors, and more as potential drivers. There is a risk of 'demonising' boys and making the problem worse if not handled well (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). This is an area for further research and action with civil society actors.

Resources from other contexts may offer useful ideas, such as the UK's gender action Resource library ([Online Library — GENDER ACTION SCHOOLS AWARD](#)).

According to the United States-based Centre for Global Development, research based on 50 years of data from 126 countries suggests that most countries with large gender gaps have low levels of male education attainment (Evans, Akmal & Jakiela, 2019). Therefore, addressing boys' schools performance in schools is critical to reaching educational development and gender equality goals. However, it is equally critical that steps to improve boys' performance do not undermine girls' education.

Annex 1

Participant List

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The table below lists the participants consulted during the research through key informant interviews, group discussions and participatory data collection exercises. The list is de-identified to protect the confidentiality of community members and children.

	SHEFA Province	TAFEA Province
PEO	(Acting) Joe Kalotap (m)	Thomas Butu (m)
Community organisations	Vanuatu Society for People with Disability representative (m)	Osnalmock Disabled People's Organisation representative (m)
	National Youth Council representative (m)	Tanna Youth and Sports Association representative (m)
REMOTE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES		
Principal	Female	Male
Teachers (female)	2 females	2
Teachers (male)	1 male	2
Parents and carers (male)	8	15
Parents and carers (female)	15	11
Students (boys)	7	8 (2 groups)
Students (girls)	8 (2 groups)	8
Community leader (male)	1	1 church leader; 2 school councillors
Community leader (female)	1	0

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RURAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES – 1 French; 1 English

Principal	1 female	1 male
Teachers (female)	2	2
Teachers (male)	1	2
Parents and carers (male)	15	11
Parents and carers (female)	11	13 f/ 1 m.
Students (boys)	8 (2 groups)	8
Students (girls)	6	8
Community leader (male)	1	1
Community leader (female)	Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union representative	Women's handicraft association representative

URBAN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Principal	0	1 female
Teachers (male)	2	2
Teachers (female)	2	2
Parents and carers (male)	13	8
Parents and carers (female)	14	16
Students (boys)	8	8
Students (girls)	4	8
Community leader (male)	0	1
Community leader (female)	0	1 church representative

Annex 2

Reference List

Vanuatu Education Support Program Phase II

Primary school in Vanuatu: Gendered expectations, roles and results | September 2021

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Annex 3

VESP Analysis of Education Data: A Gender Perspective – Scope

Vanuatu Education Support Program Phase II

Primary school in Vanuatu: Gendered expectations, roles and results | September 2021

The Analysis of Education Data conducted by VESP II and finalized in December 2020 responds to 12 questions with detailed data analysis drawing on statistics collected from 2015-2020. The report includes 36 graphs and 22 tables. The report is available from VESP on request.

Data is available on the following:

1.	Trends in Gross Enrolment Rate and NER in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), primary and secondary levels in Vanuatu
2.	Trends in retention rates in ECCE, primary and secondary levels in Vanuatu
3.	The effect of school grants and student enrolment and retention, disaggregated by province and school type
4.	The effect of the proportion of female teachers in a school on student enrolment and retention rates
5.	The effect of the language used in a school and the school type (primary level) on student enrolment and retention rates
6.	The effect of student achievement (using VANSTA results) on enrolment and retention rates
7.	The effect of teacher gender on student academic achievement (using VANSTA results)
8.	The effect of principal gender on student academic achievement (using VANSTA results)
9.	The interaction effects of location and principals' attributes on student academic achievement (using VANSTA and Open VEMIS data)
10.	The effect of the physical attributes of the school (infrastructure) on student achievement (using VANSTA and Open VEMIS data)
11.	The effect of geolocation and school infrastructure on student achievement (using VANSTA and Open VEMIS data)
12.	Gender differences in student achievement associated with the Gender Parity Index, principals' attributes infrastructure level, language spoken at school and geolocation (using VANSTA and Open VEMIS data)

Annex 4

Research design consultation

Vanuatu Education Support Program Phase II

Primary school in Vanuatu: Gendered expectations, roles and results | September 2021

On 5 February 2021, education development partners joined VESP to discuss the study design. Participants are listed in the table below.

Participant name	Organisation
Shantony Moli	Save the Children
Fabiola Bibi	UNICEF
Jonah Nawho	World Vision
Yvette Andrews	DFAT
Minnie Takaro	New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Sherol George	Vanuatu Skills Partnership
Judith Iakavai	Vanuatu Society for People with Disability
Arthur Simari	Vanuatu Society for People with Disability
Adrian Gila	MoET
Marie Laurie Kaltonga	Shefa Education Office
Manses Kalo	Freshwota School
Elina Gilu	Vila North School
Smith Anderson	MoET
Viviane Obed	Further Arts
Shirley Abraham	Kolisen Blong Leftemap Edukesen

