



SUCCESS STORY

Helen Keller Inspires Indonesia

Visually impaired children are starting to attend public schools



Photo: USAID/Virginia L. Foley

Agustiyawati, left, a specially trained teacher for the blind, uses unique educational tools in Indonesia's one-of-a-kind facility to help her student, Caca, prepare for entry into her neighborhood school.

A new “early intervention” program helps to ensure equal access to education for blind and special needs children in the public school system.

When Helen Keller visited Indonesia in 1955, she met the head of state, Sukarno, to discuss their mutual concern for blind children. She left behind a Braille printing press, 200 typewriters, and most importantly, a commitment to improve the lives of Indonesia's special needs children. Today, thanks to USAID and its partner, Helen Keller International, her vision is being fulfilled and blind children are being integrated into public schools.

Public education is compulsory in Indonesia until the age of 15, but special needs children are unofficially exempt. Exclusion from education has negative consequences for those children and creates a marginalized population whose opportunities to be fully productive are severely limited. Only 50,000 of Indonesia's one million estimated special needs children have access to education, primarily through charities. But today, the government is devolving authority over education to local officials, creating an opportunity to design inclusive policies that would bring these children into public schools. In response, USAID helped a pilot program in Jakarta lead the way in setting new standards for special needs education. The “early intervention” program provides specially trained teachers that prepare preschoolers for regular public schools. Indri Aklifia Salsabila, known as Caca, pronounced “cha-cha,” is one of the pioneer children who took part in the program. Abandoned by her mother because she was blind, Caca has been raised by her grandmother. Determined not to let Caca's disability limit her, she enrolled Caca in the program. Thanks to Caca's hard work, she is ready to start the first grade in her neighborhood school.

But the center is more than just a prep school for preschoolers. It is also a national resource for teachers, who come there to learn techniques for teaching blind children. From 2003 to 2005 this program has trained over 300 teachers. The center also teaches Braille and provides Braille textbooks. On a national level, two classifications of training for teaching visually impaired students have been developed, and the government has given grants to schools that are equipped to accommodate special needs children. Thanks to the ongoing influence of Helen Keller and a grandma committed to Caca's education, the future looks bright for this clever child. As Helen Keller once said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.”