Disability inclusive education and learning

Special education

Inscribed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), education is a basic right. A range of declarations and conventions highlight the importance of education for people with disabilities: the Salamanca Statement on education and special needs in 1994, as well as article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) adopted in 2006. The importance of education for all is also included in the Convention against Discrimination in Education 1960. In 2015, the Incheon Declaration recalled the importance of inclusive education for all. Targets 4.5 and 4.a call for access to education and the construction of adapted facilities for children with disabilities (Education 2030, 2016).

WHAT WE KNOW

There are few data on school enrolment figures for children with disabilities. However, we do know that there are between 93 and 150 million children living with a disability and, according to the Learning Generation report, in low- and middle-income countries as many as 33 million children with disabilities are out of school (Grant Lewis, 2019). Moreover, children with disabilities are less likely to complete primary, secondary and further education compared to children without disabilities.

In all countries of the world, people with disabilities have lower literacy rates than people without disabilities (Singal, 2015; UIS, 2018; United Nations, 2018). There is also a difference based on the nature of the disability i.e. illiteracy is higher in children with visual impairments, multiple or mental disorders compared to children with motor disabilities (Singal, 2015).

When they do attend school, children with disabilities score lower in mathematics and reading tests, as shown in the PASEC learning assessments (World Bank, 2019; Wodon et al, 2018). Girls with disabilities are penalized even further due to their gender (UIS, 2018). Generally, disability tends to compound social inequalities (e.g. poverty or place of residence). That said, in Pakistan, the learning gap between children with disabilities and children without disabilities enrolled in school was lower than the gap between these two out-of-school groups (Rose et al., 2018: 9). Moreover, studies in the United States of America have shown that students with disabilities achieve better academic outcomes and social integration when studying in a mainstream environment than students studying in segregated or specialized classes (Alquraini and Gut, 2012).

TOWARD A MAINSTREAM SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Inclusive education means including students with disabilities in a mainstream school environment. In
many countries today, children with disabilities attend ordinary schools but follow a specific curriculum. Moving toward a more inclusive model (i.e. students with disabilities follow an inclusive curriculum along with able-bodied students) is a long-term process.

As countries move toward more inclusive education, special schools and their staff can play a key role by acting as specialized experts and helping mainstream schools achieve greater inclusion (UNESCO, 2017). The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) studied the inclusion of students with disabilities in education sector plans in 51 countries. Seventeen of them are considering a two-pronged approach: to integrate disability in education and to invest in actions and services aimed specifically at meeting the needs of children with disabilities (GPE, 2018).

THE CHALLENGES

Many obstacles prevent children and young people with disabilities from attending a mainstream school.

- **Identifying pupils with disabilities.** Prejudices and social attitudes lead to under-declaring the number of children with disabilities (GPE, 2018). Certain families, fearing stigmatisation, do not send their children to school (Singal, 2015; EDT and UNICEF, 2016). Due to the hidden nature of certain learning difficulties, the total population of these children is largely unknown (World Bank, 2019). Identifying these children at school is rare (Wodon et al, 2018). Recognizing disabilities may be limited to observable disabilities and not necessarily those that affect the child’s ability to learn (EDT and UNICEF, 2016). Obsolete and inadequate data complicate effective educational planning and hinder decision-making and resource allocation (GPE, 2018). In addition, countries use different measurements, methods and definitions to classify disabilities thus affecting their ability to compare data (GPE, 2018; Price, 2018).

- **Lack of trained teachers.** In many countries, teachers do not have the confidence or the necessary skills to deliver inclusive education (Singal, 2015; Wodon et al, 2018). Inclusive education is only a small component of the training received by teachers and is not always assessed (EDT and UNICEF, 2016).

- **Poorly adapted school facilities and learning materials.** Poorly adapted infrastructures and a lack of accessible learning materials are significant obstacles. This is particularly true in rural areas where increased levels of poverty, poor services, and recurrent infrastructure failings exacerbate these existing problems for children with disabilities (SADPD, 2012). School curricula that solely rely on passive learning methods, such as drilling, dictation, and copying from the blackboard, further limit access to quality education for children with disabilities (Humanity & Inclusion, 2015).

- **Lack of resources.** Whether it concerns building adapted schools, reducing class sizes or teacher training, financial and human resources are required (Grimes, Stevens and Kumar, 2015). Funds earmarked for special needs are often insufficient. Where funding is available, it is primarily intended for schools and special units, rather than being used for the needs of students enrolled in mainstream schools and removing existing barriers (Mariga, McConkey and Myezwa, 2014).

- **Assessing learning.** There are few data on the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. Examinations and tests rarely make accommodations for these students putting them at a disadvantage. Most international performance tests exclude students with disabilities, which, in turn, reinforces low expectations (Schuelka, 2013 cited in Price, 2018; World Bank, 2019).
POLICY AND PLANNING

- **Defining a policy for inclusive education.** Inclusive education requires a systemic examination of education systems and school cultures. Promoting social justice and inclusive education requires drawing up, implementing and assessing plans and policies that favour inclusive education for all. Every country needs to formulate its own set of solutions that reach down to the level of individual schools (Grant Lewis, 2019).

- **Facilitating access to learning.** The first step to including children with disabilities in mainstream schools is the provision of adapted school facilities e.g. ramps, toilets, special equipment, and apparatus, as well as making appropriate teaching and learning materials available (SADPD, 2012; Malik et al., 2018). To encourage the enrolment of girls with disabilities, special measures could comprise grants or allowances (GPE, 2018).

- **Strengthening partnerships.** Inclusive education requires creating partnerships with local stakeholders i.e. parents, schools, communities, countries, ministries, and development partners (Grant Lewis, 2019). Partnerships which capitalize on local knowledge and resources have proven to be effective (SADPD, 2012; EDT and UNICEF, 2016; GPE, 2018). One recommendation is to give particular support to parents to raise their awareness of the importance of inclusive education and to integrate them into the educational community, for example by participating in school activities (GPE, 2018).

- **Ensuring adequate teacher training.** The ability of teachers to provide quality education to students with disabilities depends on their training and qualifications (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015). However, teachers often struggle due to already overcrowded classes. Offering upstream pre-service training for future teachers, investing in in-service teacher training comprising practical stages and a mentoring system are approaches that have proved their effectiveness (Akers, 2018). However, it is important to train specialized teachers as it is not possible to train all mainstream teachers to be sufficiently fluent in Braille, national sign language, and augmentative and alternative communication modes (EDT and UNICEF, 2016). The Global Partnership for Education has also highlighted the importance of training teachers to identify disabilities (GPE, 2018).

- **Statistics to reinforce human support.** Although data are rare, there are tools which can be used to monitor the participation and learning of students with disabilities. Data from household surveys are used to monitor school attendance and success rates for children, as well as to examine factors linked to non-attendance; Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) collect administrative data about school attendance, student behaviour, and progress. However, qualitative data are also needed to shed light on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the lives of students, teachers, and parents (Mont, 2018). Equally important is the collection of data on the school environment, such as the physical accessibility of schools, information on policies and legislation, teaching materials, teacher training and the availability of support specialists in schools (Grant Lewis, 2018).

- **Assessing students.** The Salamanca Statement advocates formative assessment to identify difficulties and help students overcome them (Salamanca Statement, 1994). Sæbones et al. (2015) recommend classroom assessments for individual learning. They recommend that regional and national examinations and international learning assessments systematically include all students and provide reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities. A study conducted in Kenya shows that it is possible to carry out large-scale learning assessments of deaf and blind children. However, in order to design these adapted tools, human, material and financial resources are necessary (Piper et al., 2019). For an overview of the issue of learning assessments and students with disabilities see World Bank, 2019.

- **Investing in technology.** According to UNESCO “ICTs can be a valuable tool for learners with disabilities who are vulnerable to the digital divide and exclusion from educational..."
opportunities” (UNESCO, 2014: 10). To reduce barriers, their model policy recommends the use of inclusive ICTs, commercially available products that are, as far as possible, accessible to all, as well as assistive technology to enable access when this is not possible using products available on the market. (UNESCO, 2014: 11).

- **Cost.** It is important to find ways to meet the needs of the most marginalized without additional funding (UNESCO, 2017). Approaches, such as analysing data from household surveys, suggest that the returns on investing in education for children with disabilities are high and similar to those for people without disabilities. Therefore, investing in the education of children with disabilities is both smart and profitable (Wodon et al., 2018). UNESCO recommends setting up or strengthening financial monitoring systems, as well as creating partnerships between governments and donors (UNESCO, 2017). Finally, the comparison between the cost of specialized institutions and inclusive institutions reveals that the inclusive system is more efficient (Open Society Foundations, n.d.; Inclusion International. n.d.).

- **Proposing inclusive pedagogy.** The type of disability (autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, language, hearing, etc.) influences the learning method. Inclusive pedagogy requires a shift in the educational culture within teaching and support practices i.e. moving away from ‘one-size-fits-all’ education towards a tailored approach to increase the capacity of the system to meet the diverse needs of learners without the need to categorize or label them (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). We move away from the idea of inclusion as a specialized response to certain learners, to allow them to access or participate in what is offered to most students (Florian, 2015). Inclusive pedagogy implies having resources and services that can be used by all students without the need for adaptation or specialized planning (UNESCO, 2017: 19).

**Policies**

- Fiji: Policy on special and inclusive education (2016)
- South Africa: Policy on screening, identification, assessment, and support (2014)

**Tools**


Convention against discrimination in education.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.


Education Development Trust; UNICEF. 2016. Eastern and Southern Africa regional study on the fulfilment of the right to education of children with disabilities. Reading: EDT.


Grimes, P.; Stevens, M.; Kumar, K. 2015. 'An examination of the evolution of policies and strategies to improve access to education for children with disabilities with a focus on inclusive education approaches, the success and challenges'. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2015, Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and challenges.

Humanity & Inclusion. 2015. Education for all? This is still not a reality for most children with disabilities.

Inclusion International. n.d. FAQs - Inclusion International.


Open Society Foundations. n. d. 'The power of letting children learn together'.


*Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, 1948

