

Inclusive Education and Children with Disabilities: Quality Education for All in Low and Middle Income Countries

CBM Policy Brief



This policy brief is based on a systematic literature review analysing information from 131 peer reviewed articles published from 2005 concerning primary level education of children with disabilities in low and middle income countries. This review analysed and focused on indicators of quality education outcomes for children with disabilities educated in both mainstream and special education settings. The aim was to bring together the most current research available on strategies for educational effectiveness for children with disabilities to produce a synthesis of the most effective approaches for quality outcomes.

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The full report published in April 2016 is available with CBM.
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The key issues highlighted in this policy brief are as follows:

1. Educational outcomes need to drive the inclusive education agenda rather than a focus purely on rights to access.
2. Children with disabilities are not being well served by the current situation in respect to either Education for All or inclusive education.
3. The lack of clarity and consistency over the meaning of inclusive education in relation to children with disabilities is leading to considerable variation and some degree of confusion in its implementation by low and middle income governments.
4. Not enough attention is being paid by the donor community to funding disability inclusive education as part of national education plans creating a situation where children with disabilities are not being well served by education systems as a whole – regardless as to whether they are placed in special or mainstream education programs.
5. In general, the special education sector is ill-prepared to support disability inclusive education and in many situations needs to be significantly improved before it can begin to support the mainstream to be effectively inclusive.
6. The genuine cost of supporting children with disabilities in mainstream schools needs to be understood in the context of academic performance rather than just in terms of enrollment.
7. The training of teachers to adopt inclusive classroom practices is very important. The more practical the training the more positive the outcomes. Pre-service training benefits from practical components that expose new teachers to disability inclusion and learning about the nature of impairments help them to feel more prepared.
8. In reality, curriculums and pedagogy tend to be highly centralised offering teachers little flexibility when it comes to changing their approaches in the classroom. So for inclusive education to work more systemic level change needs to happen to enable teachers to practice inclusion.

Disability is a leading cause of marginalization in education, with enrollment, primary school completion and literacy rates consistently falling below those of non-disabled children (Groce & Bakhshi, 2011; UNESCO, 2010¹). Assessing education systems in low and middle income countries (LMICs) for quality education for children with disabilities is a complex research issue and one for which there is still relatively little in the way of formal research. Whilst the evidence base is expanding, much of it still focuses on access and attendance, with less attention paid to what happens within classrooms, or to what type of education systems produce the most effective outcomes for children with disabilities (Bakhshi et al, 2013²).

The aim of this study was to bring together the most current research available on strategies for educational effectiveness for children with disabilities to produce a synthesis of the most effective approaches for quality outcomes. This multifaceted area of investigation involved drawing on elements from policy analysis (including the influence of the international development sector), teacher education, classroom practices and pedagogy, attitudes and cultural expectations, impairment identification and assessment and infrastructure.

In total, 131 articles were analysed but surprisingly only one presented evidence in terms of academic performance. That created a significant limitation in terms of putting forward learning and recommendations in regard to effective approaches. There were also very few articles that covered the important issues of early childhood education for children with disabilities and the impact of community based rehabilitation programmes on school inclusion. Of particular concern was the fact that gender was not analysed as a factor in education for children with disabilities to any great extent.

Overall, much of the literature focused on the degree to which inclusive education policies are being effectively resourced and implemented for children with disabilities, both by the governments of LMICs and by the international development sector. Concerns were raised around the lack of clarity over the meaning of inclusive education, over the preparedness of teachers to include children with disabilities and over the availability and supply of specialist support and technology.

Despite the challenges it is also clear that there is an increase in general understanding and acceptance of education as a right for children with disabilities. Teachers are more open to including children with disabilities in their

¹ Groce, N. E., & P. Bakhshi, (2011), *Illiteracy among adults with disabilities in the developing world: A review of the literature and a call for action*: International Journal of Inclusive Education, v. 15, p. 1153-1168; UNESCO, (2010), *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Reaching the marginalised*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 7 Place de Fontenoy 75352 Paris France, UNESCO.

² Bakhshi, P. Kett., M. & Oliver, K., (2013), *What are the impacts of approaches to increase the accessibility to education for people with a disability across developed and developing countries and what is known about the cost-effectiveness of different approaches?*, London, EPPI-Centre Social Science Research Unit University of London.

classrooms and when supported, can come up with innovative ways to accommodate their needs.

With the introduction of the new Sustainable Development Goals the international development sector has signalled its intention to ensure that 'no one is left behind'. Goal 4 focuses on ensuring '...inclusive and equitable quality education...' and for the first time specifies children with disabilities as a group which needs to be monitored throughout the system. This **means it has never been more important for the needs and capabilities of children with disabilities to be properly understood and supported by mainstream education programmes.**

Key messages:

...for government education departments

Universal primary education has been hugely successful in improving enrolment rates and as a result many more children with disabilities have entered mainstream schools. There does appear to be a much greater awareness over the rights of children with disabilities to education and an increased willingness by schools and teachers to accept children with disabilities under universal primary education. But this has also brought with it increased class sizes, pressures on infrastructure, resources and teacher time. Throughout this review, teachers were repeatedly raising concerns over the **practical challenges of including children with disabilities in their classrooms**. On the whole they do not feel well prepared or supported to be able to effectively teach children with disabilities especially when the general environment remains so challenging. Whilst they are usually very supportive of the idea that increasing the diversity of their classrooms is good for fostering social inclusion and equality they remain sceptical about its effectiveness from an academic perspective. There is still a tendency for teaching to be didactic rather than child-centred, providing little opportunity for the individual learning needs of children to be built into lesson planning and delivery. This affects all children, but it does impact especially on those who have specific learning needs. To help reduce some of the resistance and stress experienced by mainstream teachers **governments are encouraged to find ways to bring teachers into discussions around implementing inclusion**. They have firsthand experience of what is needed and could prove to be an important resource for governments that are committed to implementing inclusive education and improving results overall. The review also found that there is a lot of experience and commitment from the special education sector to support the transition of children with disabilities into mainstream schools. However, it is also clear that this sector is chronically under-resourced and **there is considerable scope for improving the skills of specialist teaching and support staff and for providing greater access to assistive technology**. Without first improving the special

education sector it will not be possible for them to effectively support mainstream inclusion. **Most importantly, mainstream education policies and provisioning need to be inclusive of children with disabilities** so that appropriate skills and resources can be efficiently allocated.

...for the international development community

The new Sustainable Development Goals offer a unique opportunity to support the development of education systems that are responsive to and inclusive of children with disabilities. **All mainstream education projects should be looking at how they can include children with disabilities rather than relying on separate, specialist programmes.** In particular teachers need more support through pre- and in-service training that helps prepare them for the practical challenges of including children with different impairments in mainstream classrooms. For this to be a realistic outcome, mainstream education programmes should be looking to support an increase in specialist staff (through itinerant teachers for example), assistive technology, adapted resources and environmental improvements. **Early childhood identification and interventions make a very real difference to children with disabilities and their families, improving their potential to be successfully included in mainstream schools.** Investing in early years interventions as part of inclusive education programmes could prove cost effective by reducing the need for more intensive support at primary level. This is an area that promises some real opportunities for innovation and research bringing health and education sectors together to share skills and resources.

...for the donor community

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools is important from a rights perspective and desirable from a cost effective view. However, **true cost effectiveness can only be achieved if the long term prospects of people with disabilities are improved by their experience of education.** Currently there is a danger that inclusive education is being used as a way to reduce the allocation of resources to children with disabilities by taking it away from specialist provision. More research is needed to identify what the true cost of effective inclusion is for children with disabilities so that they are properly supported in mainstream education with the specialist staff, assistive technology and adapted environments that they require. **Donors have a role to play in encouraging governments and the international development sector to thoroughly scope the cost of inclusion** and provide the necessary support to enable children with disabilities to be successful in mainstream education.