Leveraging the Power of Youth to Promote Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

Policy Brief

Ms. Nakaibale Lynda Eunice, Ms. Trixie Ann Bautista, Mr. Laeek Ahemad Siddiqui
Mr. Oluwajuwonlo Afolabi & Mr. Nir Shrestha

SUMMARY

Around the world, an estimated 240 million children are living with disabilities and 50% of these children in low and middle-income countries are out of school (Handicap International, 2022). Those who are able to attend school face numerous challenges in accessing and acquiring quality inclusive educational opportunities. A 2005 World Bank paper, "Disability, Poverty, and Schooling in Developing Countries," argues that the schooling gap between children with and without disabilities starts at Grade 1 and widens throughout their schooling. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC-1989), along with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD-2006), have clearly stated that children with disabilities shall be provided with inclusive education. However, many countries have not adequately adopted the provisions of inclusive education. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other emergency situations, have exacerbated barriers and challenges facing children with disabilities, making them more vulnerable.

It is not possible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and other global commitments without ensuring inclusive education for children with disabilities. Thus, governments should formulate and incorporate provisions for inclusive education, train and provide ongoing support to teachers and teacher educators and create an inclusive learning environment for children with disabilities to attend school and enjoy their full right to education like other children without disabilities. To achieve inclusive education for every child with a disability, every key stakeholder in the education and social sectors must be involved. One of these critical stakeholders is youth. The roles of youth are very essential across the whole process due to the energy, innovative thinking, and raw talent they possess.

Key Messages and Recommendations:

1. Prompt actions to leverage youth voices in addressing education issues for children with disabilities.
2. Include youth in the development and monitoring of inclusive education programs, policies, and other opportunities for children with disabilities.
3. Provide an inclusive space for children and youth with disabilities to prevent them from being left behind. They should have the opportunity to learn and develop essential knowledge, skills, and agency to meaningfully participate in and contribute to their communities.

INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which is based on equality of opportunity, forbids discrimination against children with disabilities in terms of access to education. However, historically, children with disabilities and many other learners have been marginalized in or expelled from schools worldwide (Taylor, 2006).

Moreover, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) emphasizes the importance of the eight guiding principles in creating a safer and more inclusive environment for all persons with disabilities, including children. The UNCRPD primarily calls on nation-states to promote the rights of every person with disabilities to be respected for inherent dignity, individual autonomy, including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence.

As such, children with disabilities worldwide are expected to have an environment that is non-discriminatory, inclusive, respects their differences, evolving capacities, and identities, accepts them as part of human diversity and humanity, provides them with equal opportunities, and is accessible.

Despite numerous efforts by governments and other stakeholders worldwide, children who have disabilities or are underprivileged are still denied their right to education. Although the UN convention affirms that inclusive education is the responsibility of the government, many governments, especially in low- and middle-income countries, have inclusive education policies in place, but the financing and implementation of these policies are extremely piecemeal. "The world will not be on pace to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 without ensuring that children with disabilities and members of other marginalized groups have access to high-quality education" (UNICEF, 2021).

Due to limitations associated with the use of specific definitions, misinformation and misconceptions about different types of disability, and the absence of a standardized data collection methodology, the availability of data on children with disabilities has long been a challenge. Therefore, such children are often excluded from official records; hence, they continue to be politically and socially "invisible," which further worsens their marginalization.

Moreover, data on children with disabilities is mostly biased towards visible disability and overlook mental health issues. There are school children suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, but a study on school-based estimates of disability found that school-based estimates on the number of children with disabilities often fail to take into account students with hidden disabilities and mental health issues (Ghandour et al., 2019). This is why the disabled population is considered by some to be the largest minority in the world and is increasing over time (Sen, 2008) as knowledge and understanding grow about disability. Furthermore, according to UNICEF's estimates using a standardized methodology, there are roughly 240 million children with disabilities globally. Children with disabilities are more likely to miss school than children without disabilities at all educational levels, according to recent MICS-EAGLE factsheets and the UNICEF 2021 report. The primary causes of school dropouts among children with disabilities are a lack of qualified instructors with knowledge of how to support students' diverse learning and socio-emotional needs, suitable and disability-responsive

facilities and classroom arrangements, accessibility, and affordability (Rohwerder, 2015; UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, child protection and safety issues are significant concerns for all children, especially CwD, as they are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (WHO, 2011). Furthermore, these children face child protection and safety challenges within, to, and from school, including School-Related Gender-Based Violence, bullying and name-calling, defilement, child neglect, discrimination, and exploitation, to mention a few. These factors consequently affect access, retention, and completion of school by children with disabilities.

Promoting Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

Status of Children with Disabilities in the world
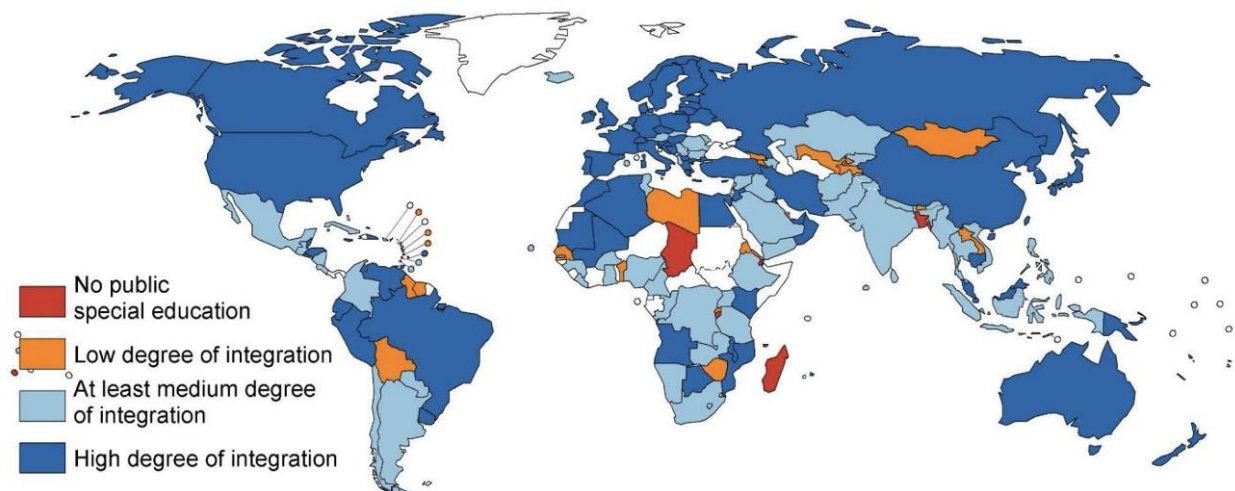
Source: WORLD Policy Analysis Center, Education Database, 2014

Children with disabilities are frequently denied the opportunity to participate in their communities, the workforce, and the decisions that most affect them. Many of the children who were left behind are disproportionately represented by children with disabilities. This has caused great deprivation in their right to learn. An assessment by the UCLA World Policy Analysis Center in 2014 shows that the right to education for children with disabilities is protected by the constitution in only 28% of nations. As such, significant barriers to education and meaningful learning opportunities for children with disabilities are common. In fact, "children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries typically have 30 to 50 percentage points lower

enrolment rates than those of their counterpart peers. Moreover, 12% of nations meet the needs of children with disabilities in separate schools, some of which are restricted to specific types of disabilities, and 5% of nations do not have public schools that cater to their needs."

In an article released by UNICEF in 2021, it shows that children with disabilities have a 42% lower chance of achieving foundational reading and numeracy skills, a 24% lower chance of receiving early stimulation and responsive care, and a 49% higher likelihood of never attending school. Furthermore, according to UNICEF research, half of the 240 million children with disabilities worldwide have never attended school; up to a third of children with disabilities do not consume enough of the right foods.

Children with disabilities became vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the education of nearly every child in the world, not all children were affected equally (Averett, 2021). Morando-Rhim and Ekin (2021) state that many students with disabilities were deprived of the hands-on instructional support and physical or cognitive therapies outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) due to prolonged school closures. It has been a great challenge for educators to adapt to the changes brought by the pandemic in teaching students, especially those with a wide range of disabilities. In the early years of the pandemic, from 2020-2021, nearly all students struggled to keep up, but those with disabilities were at the most disadvantage as they rely on specialized support and learning. Furthermore, in at least half of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic caused learning support for children with disabilities to be disrupted.

Access to quality education and information for children with disabilities has been a challenge for years, and it has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the sudden closure of schools and other learning institutions, children with disabilities were put at a greater disadvantage. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted an unexpected change in the job of the parent/guardian to act at the same time as their children's educators, as well as worsening the digital inequality between students. Children with multiple disabilities, on the other hand, have higher rates of absence from school, and disparities become even more pronounced when the severity of the disability is taken into consideration.

In the fact sheet report of the Handicap International - Humanity and Inclusion (2022), the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the innovation of distance education through information, communication, and technology, but not everyone was able to benefit from it. Pre-pandemic, children with disabilities attended schools that were often educated in separate environments and/or provided with inadequate and/or poorly adapted resources for their educational success. This instance led to a lower percentage of acquiring basic literacy skills compared to other children. For example, in the Asia and Pacific Region, the status of learning and accessibility of basic rights and services for children with disabilities continues to be a challenge, having little to no budget for the education of children with disabilities, limited programs for literacy and numeracy skills, and a lack of academic materials.

In addition, gender inequality among children with disabilities also becomes evident. Girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are less likely to own a mobile phone and have access to the internet. Even when e-learning has become an option, they also have fewer ICT skills than boys.

In Ghana, for instance, only 7% of teenage girls and 16% of teenage boys possess ICT skills (International Disability Alliance, 2020). It is important to note that technology is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution, and it cannot substitute in-person learning. However, when implemented correctly, technology has great potential to improve the accessibility of education.

The utilization of distance learning during the pandemic exacerbated existing educational disparities. Even though distance learning was available in some form in more than 90% of countries, at least 31% of schoolchildren worldwide were unable to take advantage of it. Many children, including those with disabilities, were unable to continue their education because they lacked resources and access to the internet (Handicap International, 2022).

Meaningful Involvement of Young People and Youth, Including Those with Disabilities, in Promoting Inclusive Education

Promoting inclusive education is not solely the responsibility of governments, institutions, and adults; young people and youth, including those with disabilities, can also contribute to promoting it. Although young people and youth, including those with disabilities, face obstacles, they need constant support and confidence that they can make a difference too. Engaging these young people and youth in solution-oriented discussions and conversations about promoting inclusive education is one of the best ways to contribute to sustainable and progressive development worldwide. The following are some ways young people and youth, including those with disabilities, can promote inclusive education at the community, institutional, and national levels:

1. Social Media Campaigning - Youth, including those with disabilities, can maximize their use of social media to campaign for inclusive education by sharing their experiences and observations about the current education systems in their countries. As many people worldwide are on digital platforms, sharing statements from these youth can increase recognition and reach institutions and the government. However, it is essential to ensure data protection and online security of youth for effective online advocacy.

2. Street Campaigning - Street campaigning is one of the most practiced campaigns globally. For youth, including those with disabilities, street campaigning is the most effective and accessible way to make their voices heard. Street campaigning in the form of placards, testimonials, posters, and many more, can be done to inform the public of their existence, challenges, and calls to action. While doing this, the protection of youth from physical harm, harassment, and exploitation needs to be prioritized.

3. Participate in Consultations and Discussions - Young people and youth, including those with disabilities, can participate in consultations and discussions about their needs in various ways. Whether onsite or online, worldwide online dialogues continue. Youth can reach out to community leadership and local and national government representatives in efforts to have their voices heard and to solicit support in addressing their needs. Governments must meaningfully include youth with disabilities and their representative organizations in consultations and decision-making processes and ensure that these platforms and spaces are accessible and provide reasonable accommodations when needed.

4. Conduct Research on Disability - Youth can conduct evidence-based research on disability to effectively engage in policy discussions on inclusive education with evidence and data.
5. Resource Mobilization, Budgeting, and Fundraising - Youth can engage in budget processes and advocate for increased financing for inclusive education in national budgets. Furthermore, youth can leverage their skills in proposal writing, events management to host crowdfunding campaigns to raise funds geared towards promoting inclusive education.

Challenges that children with disabilities face in acquiring inclusive and quality education
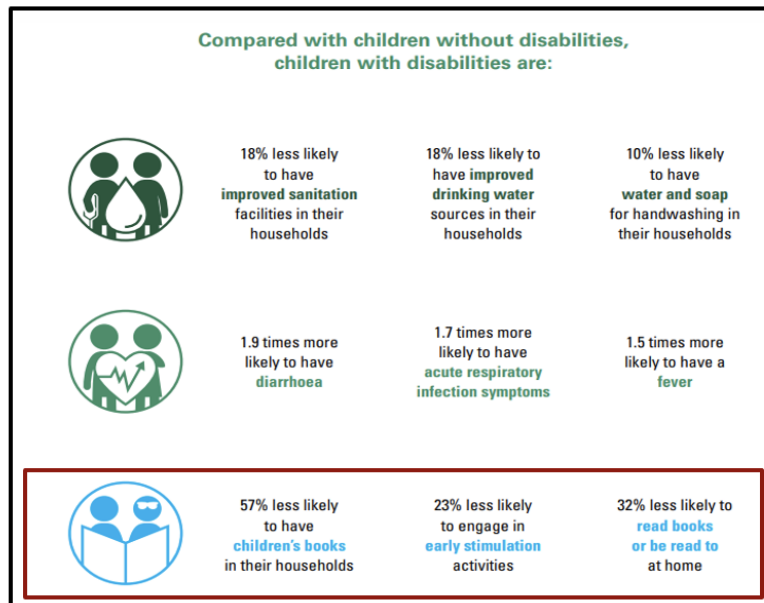
UNICEF, Children with disabilities COVID19 Response Report 2020

The figure above shows that 57% of children with disabilities are less likely to have children's books in their households. This instance can hinder the progress of children as children's books are essential instruments that provide them with a background understanding of their world. Children who have limited access to children's books are less likely to understand other genres of books at an early age. Moreover, only 23% of children with disabilities engage in early stimulation activities, which highlights the low percentage of children with disabilities who are improving in terms of their personal, transformative, and cognitive development. Lastly, 32% of children with disabilities are less likely to read books or be read to at home, which hinders their ability to acquire basic literacy skills and practice and develop them (UNICEF, 2020).

Despite numerous calls to action by public and private organizations to help these children, acquiring inclusive and quality education for them continues to be lacking. With recent events worldwide, including the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, threats, wars, and economic disruptions, many children with disabilities were left hungry, impoverished, and without equitable and inclusive education options. In addition to the challenges noted in the above-cited

report by UNICEF in 2020, here are some more challenges or barriers that these children face in society and education:

Stereotyping, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination

Most children with disabilities become vulnerable to stereotyping, prejudice, stigma, and discrimination, which can demotivate them and hinder them from showing their full potential and capabilities. Disability-related stereotypes often lead people to believe that persons with disabilities have a poor quality of life or are unhealthy due to their impairments.

Parental resistance to inclusive education for children with disabilities

Parenthood can be an emotional, difficult, and overwhelming experience. It is important to note that some parents fail to recognize their child's disorder or disability, which can prevent them from providing encouragement. Sometimes, parents unconsciously create a negative atmosphere for their children when they are overwhelmed with stress.

Communication and language barriers, and inaccessible learning materials

Children with disabilities also face challenges with communication and language barriers, as well as inaccessible learning materials. For example, children with visual impairments may struggle to learn when written modules or books do not have large print versions or braille versions for those who use screen readers. Similarly, children with hearing impairments may have difficulty understanding video lectures or audio-visual learning materials without subtitles or manual interpretations such as sign language. Children with cognitive impairments may also have difficulty understanding longer sentences, technical words, or words with multiple syllables.

Lack of access to affordable and convenient transportation to schools

Transportation to school is often overlooked in the pursuit of inclusive education. While institutions promote accessible school buildings and better-trained teachers, children with disabilities may still struggle to get to school without transportation. Across the world, millions of children with disabilities face the challenge of walking or being carried to school for long distances on unsafe paths or roads.

Poor identification and screening services for children with disabilities

Identifying and screening children with disabilities is also a major concern. Screening procedures provide a preliminary indication of a child's disability, but caution must be exercised. Many children with disabilities are not identified until the upper elementary grades or even junior or senior high school. In some cases, a disability may not appear until the child is older, and the region lacks identification and/or screening services to identify and diagnose child disability at an early age and provide tailored support for their families. As a result, children with disabilities are often placed in institutional care. Children with disabilities are up to 17 times more likely to live in institutions than other children.

In some regions, children with disabilities continue to have limited or no access to early identification and intervention services and inclusive education, despite progress in policy development and program implementation. Over-identification has been particularly problematic in the field of learning disabilities, while students with behavioural disorders are more likely to be under-recognized. Children who are compliant and non-aggressive but struggle with issues like depression, social isolation, or school phobia are less likely to be identified, referred, and provided support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The learning crisis and pandemic have disproportionately affected disabled children, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Region. They are entitled to a good education. Children with disabilities should receive an inclusive, high-quality education in all nations so that they can fully participate in society and the community as equal members and active participants.

The following are suggested recommendations to strengthen and support the development of inclusive and quality education for children with disabilities:

Recommendations for Schools and Administrations

1. Introduce a twin-track approach to education that promotes mainstream education-inclusive strategies while also providing specialized support for children with disabilities.[1] Children with disabilities are often segregated based on the type and severity of their disability at school, home, and in the community.
2. Make the learning content and curricula more flexible based on individual learning plans so that students with disabilities can master the knowledge and skills within their abilities.
3. Provide teachers with professional development opportunities and training in inclusive education so that they can teach children with disabilities more efficiently and effectively in schools.
4. Adjust the learning environment to meet the preferences of students or children with disabilities and to ensure accessibility, through the provision of reasonable accommodations and the application of Universal Design for Learning principles.

Recommendations for the Government and National Leaders

5. Support the development of inclusive education by implementing updated policies and strategic action plans, allocating budgets for the education of children with disabilities, and for operationalizing relevant policies, and coordinating with organizations of persons with disabilities and children with disabilities.

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[1] For instance, children with disabilities enrolled into school are often engaged in integrated education where they are put into special classes within school which pushes them into further discrimination. Inclusive education must ensure that the whole school system adapts and responds to the diversity among children including children with disabilities.

6. Establish a policy for inclusive education in which children with disabilities are included in mainstream education so they can learn alongside peers of their age. Furthermore, review existing policies that are discriminatory and allow for the segregation of children with disabilities.

Recommendations for Parents/Caregivers

7. Train parents and caregivers of children with disabilities in early identification and assessment of disabilities and learning difficulties in children to mitigate the severity of the disability. Equip caregivers with the skills to support and engage these children in inclusive education and learning while at home.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

This article provides that "States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to: (a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and human diversity; (b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; (c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society."

The Salamanca Statement asks governments to:

"give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties, adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise, develop demonstration projects and encourage exchanges with countries having experience with inclusive schools, establish decentralized and participatory mechanisms for planning, monitoring, and evaluating educational provision for children and adults with special education needs, encourage and facilitate the participation of parents, communities, and organizations of persons with disabilities in the planning and decision-making processes concerning provision for special educational needs, invest greater effort in early identification and intervention strategies, as well as in vocational aspects of inclusive education, ensure that, in the context of a systemic change, teacher education programs, both preservice and in-service, address the provision of special needs education in inclusive schools."

Proposed Policy Revisions

The above policies do not highlight the role of youth and young people in promoting inclusive education in their communities. Young people and youth are creative, innovative, and key

stakeholders in shaping and transforming education. A lack of meaningful involvement of youth and young people affects the operationalization of the policies.

There is a lack of emphasis on how much money national budgets should allocate for inclusive education by governments at all levels of education, starting at the foundational through the university level. The effects of this are visible in the limited number of persons with disabilities enrolling in and completing their education.

Most policies on inclusive education are not employing intersectional approaches to address challenges affecting access to inclusive education by all children.

Collaboration with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) from the start of designing inclusive education policies and practices, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation is lacking; this needs to be strengthened going forward. Meaningful progress for persons with disabilities will not take place without increasing engagement of persons with disability.

There are no clear indicators for monitoring and evaluating effective implementation of sustainable inclusive education policies at the institutional, national, and community level. For example, evaluating progress made in enrolment and retention of children with disabilities in school, the level of access to assistive technologies for enhancing learning, inclusive pedagogies, and reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities. This affects implementation, making tracking progress and changes over time difficult to assess.

Effects on the proposed revision

Investment in disability research will provide evidence-based and disaggregated data, for example, the type of disability, age, gender, and learning needs, to mention a few. This information is key in decision-making, planning, designing, monitoring, and adapting education policies and practices that are targeted, disability-inclusive, and impactful.

Capacity building of youth on disability inclusion, providing disability resources, funding, learning opportunities, and working with youth as key stakeholders in decision-making, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of disability-inclusive projects will enrich their skills to competently advocate for inclusive education at the grassroots, national, and international levels.

Strengthening early detection, identification, and assessment of learning disabilities in children by parents/caregivers, youth, and teachers will enable teachers to provide suitable support and create a learning environment that is inclusive and caters to the specific learning needs of the child.

Training teachers on inclusive education in teacher training colleges and teaching practice shall equip them with the skills to handle, support, and cater to the learning needs of all students in their classrooms and improve learning outcomes for persons with disabilities.

Curriculum reviews to integrate inclusive education starting at the foundational level, primary, secondary, and in higher institutions of learning shall equip all learners with information on disability, change mindsets and attitudes directed towards persons with disabilities, and build safe and conducive learning environments for all.

Increased resource allocation to inclusive education and public education by national governments means that funding shall be used to set up and strengthen education infrastructure, provide reasonable accommodations needed to make school inclusive and affordable for all learners, especially for learners with disabilities.

Employing multi-sectoral approaches in promoting inclusive education with an emphasis on collaboration and coordination amongst the Ministry of Education working with key stakeholders like the media, parents/caregivers, the Ministries of Health, Nutrition, Finance, and Gender, to mention but a few, will help to address intersectional factors that compound discrimination with respect to persons with disabilities' education and ensure holistic approaches are designed to promote inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

Promoting inclusive education requires concerted efforts and actions at all levels of development. The voices of young people and youth, in all their diversity, must be centred in addressing environmental and structural barriers affecting access to inclusive education for persons with disabilities at family, community, institutional, and national levels. Youth are leading global conversations on education and reimagining education systems that are inclusive, just, equitable, and equal. Efforts upholding the right to education for every child and youth, including persons with disabilities, need to be strengthened to create a sustainable, safe, and inclusive environment for all.

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