Education

In principle, all children have the same right to education. In practice, children with disabilities are disproportionately denied this right. Exclusion denies children with disabilities the lifelong benefits of education: a better job, social and economic security, and opportunities for full participation in society. In contrast, investment in the education of children with disabilities can reduce current and future dependence and contribute to their future effectiveness as members of the labour force and as active members society.

Limited school enrolment

Household survey data from 13 low- and middle-income countries show that children with disabilities aged 6–17 years are significantly less likely to be enrolled in school than peers without disabilities.¹ A 2008 survey in the United Republic of Tanzania also found that children with disabilities who attended primary school progressed to higher levels of education at only half the rate of children without disabilities.

Cycles of poverty and exclusion

Studies also show a strong link between poverty and disability – where children with disabilities are caught in a cycle of poverty and exclusion that affects them as well as their families. This is in turn linked to gender, health and employment issues. For example, girls may become caregivers to their siblings with disabilities rather than attend school, or families may not take their child with disabilities out in public or register them due to social stigma, which limits their ability to attend school. Ensuring that children with disabilities have access to education is critical for reversing such cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Limited support to educators

Teachers are a key element in a child’s learning environment, and it is important that they have a clear understanding of inclusive education and a strong commitment to teaching all children. All too often, however, teachers lack appropriate preparation in and support for teaching children with disabilities in regular schools.

Another challenge is the lack of diversity among teaching personnel. Teachers with disabilities are quite rare and in some settings considerable obstacles exist for adults with disabilities to qualify as teachers.

Divided and unclear mandates, inefficient use of resources

Divided and unclear mandates between government ministries (for example between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Welfare) regarding responsibility for the education of school-aged children with disabilities can hinder the provision of education to them. In many countries, the mandate for implementing Education For All lies with the Ministry of Education but the education of children with disabilities is managed by the Ministry of Social Welfare and is seen as a matter of charity or welfare, rather than as a human rights issue.

In some cases, resources for children with disabilities may be allocated to segregated schools rather than to an inclusive general education system. This can prove costly as well as inappropriate: in Bulgaria, the budget per child educated in a special school can be up to three times higher than that for a similar child in a regular school.

Inclusive education

Inclusive education entails providing meaningful learning opportunities for all students within the regular school system. Ideally, it allows children with and without disabilities to attend the same regular classes at the local school, with additional, individually tailored support as needed. It requires physical accommodation – ramps instead of stairs and doorways wide enough for wheelchair users, for example – as well as a new, child-centered curriculum that includes representations of the full spectrum of people found in society (not just persons with disabilities) and reflects the needs of all children. In an inclusive school, students are taught in small classes in which they collaborate and support one another rather than compete. Children with disabilities are not segregated in the classroom, at

¹ For a complete list of references, please refer to the SOWC 2013 report at: www.unicef.org/SOWC2013.
lunchtime or in the playground.

**Teacher training fosters commitment to inclusion**

Teacher training has proved effective in fostering commitment to inclusion. Studies reveal that teachers and principals who had received training in inclusive education had more positive attitudes and inclusive views than those who had received no training. Furthermore, those who had the most positive attitudes were those with actual experience of inclusion.

**Involving parents, communities and children**

Parents can play an important role in inclusive education for example by providing accessible transport, raising awareness about inclusive education, or getting involved with relevant civil society organizations. Inclusive education programmes that focus only on classroom practices, fail to harness parents’ potential to contribute. In many countries, schools have community committees that are engaged in a wide range of activities to support inclusion. For example, in Viet Nam, Community Steering Committees have been involved in advocacy, local training, securing assistive devices, providing financial support and developing accessible environments for children with disabilities in schools.

Involving children with disabilities in making decisions about accessibility and inclusive education should be a priority. While few children - with or without disabilities - are involved in making decisions about their education and lives, and while involving children with disabilities in such decisions can be particularly challenging due in part to misperceptions of them as passive victims, active, efforts must be made to guarantee their right to participation.

**A question of human rights**

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), all children have the right to education. The CRPD specifically mandates the provision of education to children with disabilities on an equal basis with other children within an inclusive system. These Conventions as well as the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education, place clear duties and obligations on States and other duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfill the right to education for all.

**A call to action**

Progress made towards providing education to children with disabilities has varied between and within countries, however too many children continue to be excluded. Adopting an approach to inclusive education grounded in respect for the rights, aspirations and potential of all children can reduce exclusion and ensure that children with disabilities are afforded opportunities to fulfill their potential in education and as full and active members of society. Fundamental elements and actions to ensure disability-inclusive education include:

- Ratify and implement the Conventions (CRPD and CRC) and ensure domestic laws, especially education laws are in harmony with them.
- Affirmative action and reasonable accommodation for all children to learn on an equal basis in a regular education system.
- Accessibility and universal design criteria is made mandatory for any design, construction or retrofitting of educational infrastructure.
- Ensure curricula, learning materials, learning processes and learning assessments are accessible to all.
- Ensure teacher preparation programmes include education of children with disabilities as an integral part and promote the instruction of ALL students (including those with disabilities), both their general and specific needs in neighbourhood/regular schools.
- Promote inclusive early childhood care and education programmes.
- Coordinate services among sectors to support the school participation of the child.
- Collect reliable, objective and disaggregated data on disability by impairment type to inform educational planning and assess impact on school participation and learning.
- Ensure one ministry and education system is responsible for the education of all children, including children with disabilities.
- Involve children with disabilities in making decisions and ensure school governance systems include provisions for effective participation of children with disabilities, their parents, disabled people’s organizations and communities.


This thematic note presents excerpts from the report related to Education. All references and original sources can be found in the full report.

For the full report or more information:

Visit our Website: www.unicef.org/SOWC2013

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