

Disability-Inclusive and Resilient Education

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2024

This 'Disability-inclusive development: Reflections on 2030 Progress' publication is supported by the Australian Government and implemented under the DFAT – CBM Inclusion Advisory Group Disability Inclusion Technical Partnership, an Australian aid initiative implemented by CBM Inclusion Advisory Group and the Nossal Institute for Global Health at the University of Melbourne, on behalf of the Australian Government.

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

Background

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and its accompanying General Comment No. 4 enshrine the rights of people with disabilities to education.^{2,3} The Cali Commitment to Equity and Inclusion in Education calls for accelerated efforts towards inclusive education, building on previous commitments including Sustainable Development Goal 4, the Salamanca Statement, and the Education 2030 Framework for Action.^{4,5,6}

However, progress is slow. On average, children with disabilities comprise 15% of all out-of-school children, however this figure is much higher in some countries, such as Tunisia (30%) and Iraq (35%). Children with disabilities are less likely to be enrolled in school, have lower rates of attendance and transition to higher levels of education, and are less likely to complete education compared to children without disabilities.^{7,8}

As a result, people with disabilities are more likely to experience lower learning outcomes. The literacy rate among people with disabilities has been estimated to be 54% compared to 77% for people without disabilities. This percentage is even lower for women and girls with disabilities.⁹

Disasters, so prevalent in many of the world's poorest countries, close schools and prevent learning, compounding inequities and inhibiting progress. As the climate continues to change, humanitarian emergencies become more common and severe, devastating infrastructure, derailing plans, pre-

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² UN General Assembly. 2007. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/45f973632.html>

³ UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2016. General comment No. 4, Article 24: Right to inclusive education. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57c977e34.html>

⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2019. Cali commitment to equity and inclusion in education. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370910>

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. and Ministry of Education and Science Spain. 1994. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Paris. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>

⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2015. Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal

⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2020. Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education: all means all. UNESCO, Paris. <https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/>

⁸ Mitra S and Yap J. 2021. The Disability Data Report. Disability Data Initiative. Fordham Research Consortium on Disability, New York. <https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/reports/disability-data-initiative-2021-report/>

⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2018. Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2019/04/un-disability-and-development-report-realizing-the-sdgs-by-for-and-with-persons-with-disabilities/>

occupying ministries of education, schools, and communities in response efforts. Ultimately, disasters limit gains made by nations seeking to strengthen inclusive education systems. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closures, learning loss, and psychosocial crises for students with and without disabilities. As education systems and schools struggle to deliver education that includes and benefits everyone and is resilient throughout pandemics and in a changing climate, people with disabilities are disproportionately disadvantaged. Lower education completion rates lead to reduced access to qualifications and fewer opportunities to find employment or to start a business.¹⁰ Consequently, people with disabilities have lower employment rates when compared to others, reinforcing the interconnectedness of disability and poverty.¹¹

Challenges and opportunities

Strengthening inclusive education requires action on several fronts, and by a multitude of stakeholders at all levels. A Framework for Disability-Inclusive Education was developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, the Global Partnership for Education, and the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to support countries in undertaking an education sector analysis. It provides an approach for assessing and supporting education systems, from early childhood education to tertiary education, through a disability-inclusive lens.¹²

The framework is divided into 2 main sections: service delivery and enabling environment. *Service delivery* consists of 3 elements that determine the extent to which schools can offer inclusive education for children with disabilities: (1) Supply covers provision of adequate teacher training, making school infrastructure accessible, and ensuring availability of textbooks and learning materials for learners with diverse disabilities; (2) Quality refers to the establishment and delivery of a relevant, flexible curriculum, regular screening and assessment of children to identify learning needs, and provision of learning support systems, including provision of assistive technologies (AT), accessible learning materials or individual assistance; and (3) Demand covers the attitudes of school communities, staff and students, additional costs of AT and learning materials, and the availability of future benefits, including opportunities for employment and social inclusion.

The second section, *enabling environment*, refers to the operating context for inclusive education and includes legal, policy and planning frameworks, systems for data and evidence to support participation and learning outcomes of students with disabilities, leadership and management capacity and partnerships to enable inclusive education, and sufficient finance to support inclusive education. These elements of the framework are essential to establishing, maintaining, and improving disability-inclusive education. However, in addition, inclusive education systems and schools must also be prepared for and resilient in the face of emergencies. If they are not, gains in these domains can be washed away or stalled by disasters and pandemics.

In response to disasters, schools often close or temporarily relocate. Students may have lost their homes and/or family members and may be absent from school for long periods. As a result, some students do not return, and if they do, they may experience learning loss from having missed time at school. A study in Puerto Rico found that standardised test scores dropped following Hurricane Maria, and following a subsequent earthquake, dropped further.¹³ Students with disabilities had

¹⁰ World Bank and World Health Organization. 2011. World Disability Report 2011. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/44575>

¹¹ Mitra S, Posorac A and Vick B. 2013. Disability and poverty in developing countries: A Multidimensional study. World Development, 41, pp.1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.05.024>

¹² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, and Global Partnership for Education, and UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. 2021. Education Sector Analysis: Methodological Guidelines. <https://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/publication/education-sector-analysis-methodological-guidelines-vol-3-thematic-analyses>

¹³ Segarra-Alméstica E, Caraballo-Cueto J, Cordero Y and Cordero H. 2022. The effect of consecutive disasters on educational outcomes. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2022.103398>

even lower test scores. The dropout risk was high for all students, but especially for students with disabilities.

Recent evidence on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational outcomes points to smaller gains in academic abilities following the pandemic, especially in mathematical skills, and higher rates of students leaving school early.¹⁴ Another study found that the mental health problems experienced by students with disabilities rose during COVID-19, with the introduction of remote learning and associated reductions in social interactions with peers and teachers.¹⁵ Research from China found that students with disabilities faced 4 challenges during the pandemic: the requirements of students with disabilities were not considered in the design of education policies; technological strategies offered to students were not accessible; mainstream schools offering remote schooling options overlooked the education of students with disabilities; and parents were unprepared to support remote schooling.¹⁶

Learners with disabilities face increased educational vulnerability because of disasters. Reasons for this include the loss of accessible school infrastructure, loss of consistent emotional support from teachers who leave due to staff turnover, high sensitivity to changes in routine, loss of diagnostic data and documentation about their educational support requirements, limited access to required health or specialist services, loss of AT such as wheelchairs and hearing aids, and loss of support personnel including carers and sign language interpreters.

School closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of education systems for learners with disabilities. Approximately 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries did not take any measures to support learners at risk of exclusion during the crisis. While some countries put remote learning approaches in place, these were often not accessible to students with disabilities, potentially resulting in disproportionate learning loss.¹⁷

Inclusive education systems and schools must be resilient to disasters at all levels. There is a tradition of this in highly disaster-prone countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, and emerging awareness in Pacific countries, where inclusive school disaster preparedness plans are in place in many schools in 8 of 15 countries.¹⁸ However, many schools in many countries still require disability inclusive disaster preparedness plans. Further, noting the high number of children with disabilities who do not attend school, disability inclusive disaster preparedness education is required in communities to ensure that children with disabilities participate in and benefit from drills and simulations.¹⁹

Education systems that proactively anticipate future challenges, developing contingency plans and providing necessary resources, can improve educational continuity for all learners, including those with disabilities. Schools must be built to withstand emergencies, and able to reopen and re-establish programs quickly to limit attrition and optimise the psychosocial health of all students. Additionally, schools that are empowered to visit students with disabilities at home, and be flexible

¹⁴ Kuhfeld M, Soland J, Tarawasa B, Johnson A, Ruzek E, and Lewis K. 2020. How Is COVID-19 Affecting Student Learning: Initial Findings from Fall 2020. Brown Center Chalkboard. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/12/03/how-is-covid-19-affecting-student-learning/>

¹⁵ Aquino K C and Scott S. 2023. Supporting Students with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Perspective of Disability Resource Professionals. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(5) pp.4297. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36901305/>

¹⁶ Jia L and Santi M. 2021. Inclusive education for students with disabilities in the global COVID-19 outbreak emergency: some facts and thoughts from China. Disability & Society. 36(7), pp.1186-1191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1925226>

¹⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2020. Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education: all means all. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Paris. <https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/>

¹⁸ United Nations Children's Fund. 2022. Pacific Regional Inclusive Education Review. United Nations Children's Fund, Suva. <https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/reports/pacific-regional-inclusive-education-review>

¹⁹ Stough L M, McAdams D E, Kang D and Lee S. 2020. Disasters, schools, and children: Disability at the intersection. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 45(4). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2019.101447>

with homework, attendance and uniform expectations can improve student retention and limit learning loss.²⁰

Diverse learning models can support and enable ongoing learning during disasters including pandemics, such as hybrid learning models that utilise technology as well as face-to-face teaching and learning.²¹ The ratio of technological to in-person teaching can change depending on the circumstances. However, technology infrastructure is required for this to work, including access to computers or tablets for children with disabilities, which are not always available in countries with limited resources.

Preparing for ongoing inclusive education in the face of disasters, including pandemics, requires collaboration between education stakeholders and others, including disaster management stakeholders, civil society organisations including organisations of people with disabilities, health stakeholders and communities. Stakeholder cooperation in the development of plans that benefit students with disabilities can result in referral networks and shared resource allocation. These networks and resources can enable the provision of social supports to improve the welfare of learners with disabilities and their families, stabilising home environments so that children can return to learning as quickly as possible. For example, social protection measures for learners with disabilities and their families can act as a safety net, mitigating shocks from disasters and promoting continued school attendance.²²

Looking ahead to 2030

Enabling resilient disability inclusive education by 2030 requires the use of a disaster preparedness lens in planning, implementation, and monitoring. Applying this to the Framework for Disability-Inclusive Education may assist in building education systems and schools that are resilient to shocks and emergencies.

The first section within the framework on service delivery covers school-level delivery of inclusive education that benefits children with disabilities. The use of a resilience lens prompts the following recommendations. Teacher training must incorporate disaster preparedness and response approaches that include students with disabilities, and the use of disaster preparedness plans in their classrooms. Schools must ensure their evacuation facilities are accessible, including water, sanitation and hygiene amenities, and that information about evacuation is accessible to all. Learning materials must be prepared, made available and delivered in a range of formats (electronic and paper-based) in readiness for remote learning, necessitated by a disaster or pandemic.

Information regarding the diagnoses, learning needs and plans of children with disabilities could be located on paper and via electronic files that are backed up on a shared server, so that they are available even after a disaster. A tradition of using student disability data to inform planning and delivery of lessons must be established. Partnerships must be sought with health and civil society service providers, who may stockpile AT for distribution following a disaster.

The second section within the framework covers enabling environments. Application of a resilience lens in relation to this prompts the following suggestions. Ministry of Education policies and plans must incorporate measures to support disaster preparedness and climate change. An overarching

²⁰ Kuhfeld M, Soland J, Tarawasa B, Johnson A, Ruzek E, and Lewis K. 2020. How Is COVID-19 Affecting Student Learning: Initial Findings from Fall 2020. Brown Center Chalkboard. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/12/03/how-is-covid-19-affecting-student-learning/>

²¹ Kuhfeld M, Soland J, Tarawasa B, Johnson A, Ruzek E, and Lewis K. 2020. How Is COVID-19 Affecting Student Learning: Initial Findings from Fall 2020. Brown Center Chalkboard. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/12/03/how-is-covid-19-affecting-student-learning/>

²² GLAD network. 2017. Promoting Disability-Inclusive Climate Change Action. <https://gladnetwork.net/search/resources/secretariat-global-action-disability-glad-network-presents-issue-paper-and-guide>

national plan for disaster preparedness and climate change in education could guide school-level development of disaster preparedness plans. Government and school leaders must be trained in the importance of resilient disability-inclusive education and could be supported to establish partnerships with other government departments and civil society to enable access to supplementary support services, for example psychosocial support and social protection schemes.

As inclusive education approaches take hold around the world, much needs to be done to strengthen education systems and schools so that they are resilient as well as inclusive. Resilient inclusive education systems continue to benefit learners with disabilities during and after disasters and pandemics. Efforts must be implemented, monitored and successful practices should be shared to inspire and multiply effects around the world.